



ITHURIEL'S SPEAR

W·H·FITCHETT



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ITHURIEL'S SPEAR

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'YOU SHOULD HAVE CLEARED WHEN I TOLD YOU.'

ITHURIEL'S SPEAR

BY

W. H. FITCHETT, B.A., LL.D.

AUTHOR OF

'DEEDS THAT WON THE EMPIRE'; 'HOW ENGLAND SAVED EUROPE';

'THE COMMANDER OF THE HIRONDELLE'; 'THE UNREALIZED
LOGIC OF RELIGION,' ETC., ETC.

Ithuriel with his spear
Touched lightly; for no falsehood can endure
Touch of celestial temper.

Paradise Lost

Life is the true Ithuriel's spear.

WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

London

CHARLES H. KELLY

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ITHURIEL'S SPEAR

CHAPTER I

THE TALK ON THE BRIDGE

'AFTER all,' said one of the three, 'it is an ugly creed, and as cruel as it is ugly.'

'But, Smears, old fellow,' replied a second figure in the group, 'you can't resist its logic.'

'No, Cecil,' sighed Smears, 'I can't, and that's the cruelty of it.'

'But I do,' said a third, with emphasis. 'I say it's all a wisp of rhetorical fog. A ray of sunshine scatters it! There's no logic in it. It is easy to unsettle things, to sneer at things, to talk windy generalities about things. But the world is built on Christianity. It is unintelligible without it. It would come to a stop if it vanished.'

'Ah!' said Cecil, 'we know you are a regular old stickfast, Kit, as stubborn as they make them. But I keep an open mind, and accept truth in whatever shape it comes. The question is not whether a creed is "ugly" or "cruel," but whether it's true.'

The three young fellows stood on the bridge, the dark, mysterious, sliding waters below them filling the air with a murmurous chant, a soft, whispering recitative

that rose and sank in response to a thousand vagrant air-eddies. Above, the full moon flooded the wide, deep heavens with its light. The flying white clouds gave the sky a curiously peopled look. There was life in the deep blue spaces. The heavens were busy ; the earth, white in the moonlight, was still and unbreathing.

It was Sunday evening. The churches had long since emptied themselves ; the worshippers had gone home ; the streets had grown silent again. The three young fellows who stood leaning on the parapet of the bridge had listened that night to the most successful of Mr. Gifford's lectures, one of a series on 'The Religion of a Sensible Man,' which he was just then delivering in Middleford on behalf of the local Freethought Association. He had in eager, triumphant accents proclaimed the non-historic character of Christianity, and the unscientific quality of its teaching. The universe, he argued, was a web of impersonal forces. It emerged from mystery. It was clad in mystery. It was hastening into mystery. No explanation of it was possible. No Divine Maker was visible, still less any Divine Father. The earth was but an atom, wandering in measureless space. Man was an unregarded speck upon this unguided atom. Measured against the stellar spaces, he was a speck of even infinitesimal scale, to express whose insignificance was a feat which left arithmetic itself bankrupt. Then, by way of peroration, Mr. Gifford quoted, in his deep and thrilling voice, and with overwhelming effect, those melancholy stanzas from the 'City of Dreadful Night,' in which despair is heard singing :

The world rolls round for ever like a mill ;
It grinds out death and life and good and ill ;
It has no purpose, heart or mind or will.



'JESUS CHRIST IS NO DREAM,' SAID KIT STEADILY.



While air of Space and Time's full river flow,
The mill must blindly whirl unresting so:
It may be wearing out, but who can know?

The three young fellows had strolled together after the lecture—with that happy faculty for comradeship, and for debate on all subjects in heaven and earth, which is the gift of youth—to their favourite place of gossip, the bridge. A curious silence presently fell upon them. The glow of the lecturer's eloquence faded, the music of his voice ceased to chime in their ears. Somehow the ordered majesty of the silent yet moving heavens above them, and the white purity of its light, and even the message of the river, whispering unseen in the darkness below them—plaintive as was its key—seemed in odd discord with Mr. Gifford's lecture.

Presently Smears broke the silence, as we have heard, with the abrupt words, 'It's an ugly creed, and as cruel as it's ugly.'

Smears—or, to give him his proper name—Claude Meares, was a tall and slight-built figure, with a head that seemed like a heavy flower on a too slender stalk. He had a curiously sensitive mouth, and pensive yet questioning eyes. It was a lovable face, with an aspect at once of frailty and of brooding, half-melancholy thought, which made all motherly women eager to take charge of him. His father had died early; his mother, a sad-faced woman, who loved her child with an almost morbid affection, had kept him by her side, and he had grown up under the shadow of her sorrow. He had never known the tonic of school-life, with its friendships, its feuds, its eager competitions, its joy in physical contests. He early showed rare promise as an artist, and so had won from the few chums of his

own age the jesting yet affectionate sobriquet of 'Smears.'

His mother's death left him alone in the world ; his own broken health arrested his studies. He had a keen religious sense, but his religion had its roots rather in half-melancholy sentiment than in reasoned and spiritual conviction. And Mr. Gifford's rhetoric took his imagination captive. Smears, under the music of that matchless voice, and caught in the sweep of its hurrying but misty eloquence, felt as if there were poured into his blood, into the very cells of his brain, the intoxication of a sort of divine hachish.

But the sensation was brief. The ferment in his blood and brain grew chill ; a mental reaction followed, and poor Smears was awaking to the disquieting consciousness that his early creed had disappeared, and another of very unsatisfactory quality had taken its place.

Cecil Sparks was much the most notable figure of the three, with keen face, hair as dark as a raven's wing, restless eyes, and a smile which, as it revealed the level white teeth, swept over his dark features with the effect of a sudden and dazzling flash of light. His charm, however, was chiefly one of manner. He had a soft voice, an exquisite tact, and a caressing grace of manner, signs which, as John Henry Newman, with a gleam of uncomfortable and wizardlike insight, says are not seldom hints of a sensual temper.

'Old Stubborn,' as Christopher—or 'Kit'—Somers was called, was the least striking figure in the group on the bridge. No one would have called him handsome. He was square-shouldered, square-headed, with fair hair that ran in a wave above his forehead, and honest grey eyes. A famous runner, a fine cricketer,

with an unconquerable honesty and good temper, he had been the hero of his school, though he had not carried off any great scholastic prizes. He was now a mining engineer, a vocation in which his practical gifts promised success, but he still kept the frank and simple good nature of the schoolboy, though his open face and square chin showed he possessed the strength of a man. Kit, in fact, was cool and level-headed, and religion in him was something better than even a reasoned conviction. It was a verified experience. Words, no matter how sonorous, counted for little with Kit, and he was quite unmoved by Mr. Gifford's most eloquent passages.

He broke in with serious protest on the talk of his chums, as they loitered on the bridge; but quite in vain. Cecil accepted his new creed with a sense of exhilaration; Smears with a sigh; but both accepted it.

'It will kill my art,' said Smears, as he stared at the dim river, a mere flow of softly vocal blackness. 'What room is there in the world for art? We are only meaningless atoms in the river, as idle as atoms, and gone as swiftly.'

'But why should it kill your art?' inquired Cecil. 'The world is still beautiful.'

'No,' cried Smears energetically, 'no! The glory has gone from the sunset, the message from the stars, the meaning from the flowers. There is no soul in it all. It's a machine—and a brainless machine at that; though I suppose a brain has shaped it. Love has slipped out of it. So long as I saw God in it the universe meant something; it taught me something. There was Love behind it all, no matter how hidden. But what am I to the universe? No more than a drop to the river. And what does the river know of

the drop, or care for it.' And his lips murmured the stanzas Mr. Gifford had quoted :

While air of Space and Time's full river flow,
The mill must blindly whirl unresting so.

'Is that what the river is singing? I don't call such a message music. The life has died out of the face of the universe. Why should I paint a dead face? I accept it. Yes! you dear old "Stubborn," it's no use living in a dream. But alas for the dream that has gone!'

'Jesus Christ is no dream,' said Kit steadily; 'God is no dream. Didn't the poet who wrote the "City of Dreadful Night" commit suicide afterwards as a comment on his own poem? I'll put Tennyson against your melancholy Thomson. Don't you remember:

'Closer is He than breathing; nearer than hands or feet.'

'It's a poor business setting poet against poet,' cried Cecil. 'What do they know about the matter? For my part I stick to prose; the sober prose of facts and of science.'

'But,' answered Kit, 'Mr. Gifford's science is wrong, as well as his poetry. I know enough to know that. My university work taught me it. All science has, at its root, an act of faith. The physical is only a veil behind which the spiritual hides, or an instrument for the spiritual to use. You leave out half the universe—and its noblest half—if you reject, as he does, the spiritual.'

'And where does your science,' demanded Cecil, 'discover the spiritual?'

'How do you hear the river?' asked Kit. 'What's the process in terms of science? The air waves set

the membranes in the ear vibrating; the physical vibration runs along the nerve to the brain. There it vanishes into mystery; it emerges, somehow, in our consciousness, translated into non-physical terms, into the idea of flowing water. The physical vibration is nothing; the non-physical idea is everything, and we only receive it by a process of faith. It is an act of faith in the veracity of the report—brought in the shape of nerve vibrations—of our senses, by which we know the river exists. And surely the spiritual organs are as credible as the physical. So I know God and Christ just as surely as I know light and colour and gravitation.'

'I didn't believe you capable of so much philosophy, Kit,' commented Cecil jeeringly. 'But it doesn't convince me.'

'I'm afraid, Cecil,' said Kit gently, 'you don't particularly want to be convinced.'

'Well, I haven't the artist's brain, like Smears, and I've not borrowed science from a university like you. I've only the plain sense of the commercial mind. But that enables me to see Mr. Gifford is right.'

'Yes,' said Smears. 'I love you, Kit, for your very obstinacy, and I envy your faith; but I, too, think Mr. Gifford's argument is final. The very scale of the universe disproves Christianity. The stage is too big for us to pretend that the poor little drama of our lives fills it. But, oh! it's cruel! I hate the universe when I think of it as a huge, pitiless, unconscious machine, that will grind me up like a little grain of wheat, caught between the stones of a mill, and not even know what it is doing.'

'But I don't mean to be a grain of wheat, with no other end but to be ground,' cried Cecil. 'I'll do the

grinding. After all, the world is our tool. We can master it and use it. It's common sense to stick to realities ; and so I vote with Mr. Gifford. But pleasure is real ; and money is real ; and life is real, and I don't see why I shouldn't have a good time—all the better, indeed, for what Mr. Gifford has taught me.'

'But a "good time" doesn't lie that way,' said Kit, 'in pleasure and money ; in a life that will end at the coffin-lid.'

'Well, I'll risk it,' replied Cecil. 'It's good enough for me.'

'It's not good enough for me,' said Smears, with a sigh ; 'I feel like one who has been reading a wonderful poem. Suddenly the letters all fade, and he is left staring at a blank page.'

'Then write your own characters on the blank page,' laughed Cecil, 'and make them pleasant ones.'

'Cecil,' said Smears again, after a pause, 'this is all very well ; but what about Kate Arden ?' And with that question an odd silence fell on the group.

CHAPTER II

ALARMS AMONGST THE ORTHODOX

'SOMETHING must certainly be done,' said Mr. Sawders, the Congregational minister, meditatively to his fellow committee-men. Mr. Sawders was commonly known as 'Sawdust' amongst the more frivolous, on account of the alleged dryness of his discourses.

A few ministers and influential laymen had lingered, after a meeting of the committee of the Middleford Literary Institute, to talk over the movement which was disquieting all the orthodox sentiment of the town.

'Our select class of young men,' said, in rueful tones, Mr. Jevons, the superintendent of the largest Sunday school in the town, 'is half deserted.'

'Our Association is shaken,' said Mr. Twitters, the secretary of the Y.M.C.A., in accents as solemn as though he had been reporting another Lisbon earthquake. 'The situation grows most serious. Our last Wednesday evening's social did not pay expenses,' and the little man's face grew pensive as he meditated on this tragedy.

The local Freethought Association of Middleford ordinarily carried on an unregarded warfare against things in general, from an obscure concert-room, hired for Sunday evening use. Mr. Stumps, its paid representative and champion, was a gentleman with a

strident voice, irregular aspirates; a highly developed gift for controversial rhetoric, and a convenient ignorance of everything not to be found in the columns of the *Freethinker*. His lectures on 'Moses and Munchausen' evoked much noisy delight from limited audiences, but the collections barely sufficed to pay the rent of the dingy hall in which they were delivered, and Mr. Stumps was usually engaged in shrill and angry warfare with his own followers over the unpaid arrears of his not too generous salary. This was a state of things which allowed the orthodox churches of Middleford to slumber in peace.

Suddenly a stroke of almost bewildering good fortune befell the cause of Freethought in the town. Mr. Hobbs was a retired brewer, afflicted at once with a despotic temper, a gouty foot, and an ignorance of religion which was almost pathetic in its completeness. He alternately patronized and bullied the meek little curate of St. Margaret's, the modest ivy-clad building which Mr. Hobbs used to described as 'my church.' But even a clerical worm will turn at last, if trodden on too industriously. Mr. Hobbs wanted to dismiss the entire choir of St. Margaret's for the somewhat inadequate reason that the daughter of a leading Rechabite had found a place in it. The soft-voiced curate exhausted all his arts of half-feminine diplomacy to escape a quarrel; then, at last, taking his courage in both hands, he told Mr. Hobbs, in trembling accents, that the choir must remain.

That gentleman glared with inarticulate wrath at the apologetic, black-coated little figure that yet dared to resist his majestic will. A paroxysm of gout added new fire to the fury of Mr. Hobbs. He would ruin,' he bellowed, 'every church in Middleford!' He flung

himself into the hostile camp without reserve. Red-faced and furious, he hobbled to the dingy rooms of the Freethought Association; and, to its astonished secretary, Mr. Creakles, announced his intention to hire the best tongue and brain Freethought could produce, and start a crusade which should make every parson in Middleford tremble in his clerical shoes.

‘And hang all expense,’ added Mr. Hobbs, with an energy which made Mr. Creakles’s eyes snap.

Yet another piece of good fortune at this point overtook the delighted Mr. Creakles. A lecturer was discovered who bore to the ordinary Freethought orator, with shabby dress and doubtful antecedents, the relation, say, a Derby winner bears to a broken-kneed cab-horse. From the list of authorized Freethought lecturers Mr. Creakles chose its latest and most promising recruit, Mr. Gifford. Mr. Stumps represented mere fustian, not to say shoddy. To run a thread of shining silk through the dingy web of Freethought oratory would be a great feat, and Mr. Gifford was exactly the artist to achieve this. He undertook to deliver a series of Sunday evening lectures on ‘The Religion of a Sensible Man’; and when he walked out on the stage of the local theatre, which had been engaged for his use, although Middleford was unconscious of the circumstance, a new force, destined to write a strange page in its history, had made its appearance.

Mr. Gifford was still a young man, whose life, hitherto, had been a series of unsatisfactory experiments. He was himself a sort of unfulfilled prophecy. He had been a bank clerk, a newspaper reporter, a minor—a very minor—poet, a university student, the pastor of a Congregational church; and all this in almost breathless succession. But though he attempted many vocations,

so far he had succeeded in none. He was gently invited to resign his not too elevated post in the bank on account of the incurable vagueness of his arithmetic. He ended his career as a reporter by plunging his editor into a ruinous lawsuit. His modest volume of poems, entitled *Azure Gleams*, had brought him neither cash nor fame, but only a bitter quarrel with his publisher. He brought his university career to a close without taking a degree, and he ended his history as the pastor of Hepzibah Chapel by renouncing it and Christianity together.

Mr. Gifford became an ardent champion of a somewhat vague theological amalgam which he labelled 'Freethought,' and he undeniably brought to it some rare and fine qualities. He had the gift of eager, magnetic speech; a fiery hate of shams, or of what he thought to be shams; a generous sympathy with discredited causes; a knowledge which, if loose, was wide; and a logic which, if not always in accordance with the textbooks, was yet flushed with generous sentiment, and so made effective for the crowd. Tall, slender, black-browed, with rushing speech, sonorous voice, eager, kindling eyes, and a certain picturesque knightliness of carriage, he was exactly the figure to capture and sway a mixed audience. His very look

Drew audience and attention still as night,
Or summer's noontide air.

He had married a wife of good family, whom even the ladies of St. Michael's—the very home of social and religious conservatism—admitted to be 'very nice, poor thing.'

Altogether, Mr. Gifford was a very picturesque figure, and his lectures proved a sensation. They half emptied

most of the not over-full churches of the town, and they filled the columns of the local journal with correspondence. Young men, especially, were captivated by the ardent rhetoric of this new apostle of doubt.

His gospel, too, was of a fascinating quality. There was in it no such thing as 'sin.' The very term was unscientific. All healthy, natural instincts justified themselves. 'Theology' was a sort of Guy Fawkes, fit only to be thumped—a stuffed image, with solemn mask, but wooden head and bowels of straw. Orthodox religion was only a bundle of superstitions; and, in Mr. Gifford's rhetoric, 'superstition' meant all those beliefs reaching out of the unseen world, out of the realms beyond man and Time, which put limits to human passions, and link eternal consequences to human acts; the beliefs which open eternal horizons, and reveal God sitting as Master and Judge in the circle of human life.

Science, Mr. Gifford contended, was the true revelation; utility the sole standard of action. Human nature was intrinsically noble. Man knew, and could know, no Being above himself. He owed account to nothing outside himself.

Mr. Gifford had the happy art of appropriating whatever was attractive and plausible in other men's speculations, and melting it down into a doctrinal syrup of his own, with flavours which would have astonished the original owner. His science owed much to Comte and Haeckel, and something, though less, to Darwin. His theology was borrowed from Herbert Spencer, and Mill, and Frederic Harrison, with a dash of Nietzsche's gloom added. He contemplated his Bible through spectacles too thickly filmed with doubts to have been borrowed even from Schmiedel himself. All other religions were, he held, but dim hints, unconscious and inarticulate

prophecies, of this latest theological birth. It had a Worship, a Hope, a Revelation, all in capital letters. What, indeed, the new religion would have done without capitals cannot be guessed. It would have been as bankrupt as a palette without colours!

Worship, in the new creed, found its object in man's higher nature; Hope, its field in man's future—the future not of any individual *homo*, like the actual John Smith who listened, but of Man (spelt, of course, with a capital M) the race. Revelation was supplied not by any choir of inspired prophets and apostles, but by the tests and retorts of human laboratories.

Perhaps Mr. Gifford's denials were more significant and alarming than even his affirmations. It is so easy to deny! There was no personal God, having personal relations with His creatures; no inspired Bible; no eternal and suffering Love, seeking the lost; no watching Providence over human life; no City of God whose gates of pearl gleam through even the blackness of death. The only religion was the love of humanity; the only faith a belief in humanity.

This mosaic of doctrinal fragments had one great advantage: it was possible to quote so many authorities—or at least half-authorities—on its behalf! A nimbus of great names surrounded it. If any one, indeed, knew enough of the teachings of these authorities, he might have shown that furious civil war raged amongst them, and each one, in turn, and at some point, had the entire company arrayed against himself. These eminent authorities rejected each other more energetically than they all rejected Moses or St. Paul; and each of them in turn would have renounced many of Mr. Gifford's principles and nearly all his conclusions. But, then, very few of Mr. Gifford's hearers knew enough to be aware

of this inconvenient fact. Mr. Gifford, indeed, was unconscious of it himself. The tissues of a flower absorb only such colour-rays as suit itself, and reject all others. And Mr. Gifford had the happy faculty, common to a certain class of eager disputants, of maintaining a delightful ignorance of all facts which do not fit into their own theories.

Meanwhile, his eager and daring rhetoric swept the crowd away. Many a timid mother, sitting lonely in her orthodox pew, grew alarmed as she reflected that her son was swelling the excited audiences which cheered Mr. Gifford's lecture on 'Every Man His Own Christ,' at the local theatre.

Then came a yet more surprising bit of good fortune for the Freethought Association. Mr. Hobbs died suddenly, killed by a paroxysm of wrath, aggravated, it was unkindly whispered, by an extra jug of his own beer. But this was unjust to Mr. Hobbs. He knew too much about his own beer to commit the indiscretion of drinking it. His temper, and not his beer, killed him. When his will was read, it was found that his quarrel with the unfortunate curate of St. Margaret's, and with all that the curate represented, found startling expression in it. He vested £30,000 in trustees for the establishment of a Freethought Lectureship. Mr. Gifford at a generous salary was nominated as the first holder of the lectureship. Five members of the Freethought Committee—including Mr. Creakles—were made trustees for the principal sum, and a clause in the will directed the trustees to expend certain moneys at their discretion in 'the practical application of Freethought principles to social problems.' The astonished town of Middleford thus beheld itself turned into a sort of *corpus vile* for strange theological experiments.

Mr. Creakles and his fellow committee-men were, as may be imagined, in a state of bewildered delight. The sacred cause for which they argued and laboured had hitherto suffered from an ignoble want of cash. The Association, as a consequence, had been compelled to confine itself to merely vocal exercises. Now it was endowed. It owned a fat bank account. It was commissioned not merely to orate and criticize, but to undertake 'practical applications of Freethought principles.' Mr. Creakles moistened his thin lips with a sort of canine anticipation as he reflected on the possibilities of the situation.

On the other hand, orthodoxy—in patches, at least—grew panic-stricken. 'Something must be done,' argued Mr. Sawders. 'Let us challenge Mr. Gifford,' he added courageously, 'to public debate!'

Mr. Sawders was a pugnacious divine, who reflected with secret complacency on the victory he had achieved over the representative of the Plymouth Brethren cause in the next street, and the triumphant manner in which he had routed a wandering Anglo-Israelite.

'We are going to put a new carpet in our select class-room,' said Mr. Jevons, the Sunday-school superintendent.

'We have agreed to enlarge our gymnasium and buy a new magic-lantern,' piped Mr. Twitters, the secretary of the Y.M.C.A.

'I have arranged for a series of papers on "Modern Doubt,"' solemnly announced Mr. Brush, the editor of the *Banner of Zion*, the local religious journal.

'My dear Sawdust,' said, with a laugh, Mr. Miller—a retired Congregational minister, who had parted with all his illusions, and whose uncomfortable function in life it was to discourage people from doing anything—

'public debate will only advertise the man. The attractions of a new carpet on the floor of your classroom, Mr. Jevons, or even the addition of a swimming-bath to your gymnasium, Mr. Twitters, will not supply medicine to a sick faith. While as for your papers on modern doubt, Mr. Brush, the only people likely to read them are those who have no doubt at all—but who,' he added, in a stage 'aside,' 'may get them from the very articles you write.'

'As for me,' said Mr. Walton, the Wesleyan minister, a man of ardent zeal, 'I shall take no notice of the man or of his lectures. What use to argue with unbelief? You might as well try to cure a fever with the multiplication table as to convert a sceptic with logic. I am not going to waste my time wrestling with shadows. Our business is to preach positive truth—an inspired Bible, a supernatural redemption. I have a sick man to visit, so good-night'; and he hurried away.

'Mr. Walton is both right and wrong,' said Professor Gardner, with a judicial air.

Professor Gardner was the head of a theological college planted in the town, and had a benevolent hospitality for what may be called theological freaks, which his stricter brethren sometimes found rather trying.

'We best meet unbelief, it is true,' he went on, 'by preaching a real gospel, with an historical basis, a gospel that finds its verification in men's own consciousness. But this case is special. We owe something to the cause of truth, which is being publicly misrepresented. We owe something to Mr. Gifford too, for he is intellectually honest, and he is only the more dangerous because he is so transparently sincere. I know him, and was once of some service to him. I think if we ask him to meet us privately for frank and

friendly talk he will accept the invitation. Debate in the presence of crowds usually ends in a mere scramble for victory, and the man with the strongest lungs and the most tricky brain wins. But we don't need Milton to teach us that if Truth and Error grapple together on a fair field Truth will win. I will ask Mr. Gifford to meet us in private and friendly conference, where quiet reason will have some chance of being heard.'

'And I,' cried Mr. Sawders, grasping his umbrella as though it were the sword Excalibur itself, 'I will challenge him to public debate next week.'

Mr. Campbell here broke into the discussion. He was the vicar of St. Paul's, a white-headed, sweet-faced man, who, to the homely and humorous wisdom of a kind of clerical Aesop, added the spiritual temper and insight of a saint.

'Your round-table conference, Professor,' he said, 'will do as little good as Mr. Sawders's platform duel. The man will run his little course, and vanish. Christianity has survived nineteen centuries, and it's not going to be killed by Mr. Hobbs's legacy or Mr. Gifford's lectures. Is Christianity a theme for a debating club? May logicians quarrel over it, and sit in judgement on it? Life is the only forum where that great issue is to be tried.

'Now, I'm delighted with that legacy, and wish it were twice as big. Freethought is going to "apply" itself! The operation will be fatal! Poor Gifford's air-spun nonsense will come into conflict with the passions and forces that throb in human nature, and they'll fare as a cobweb would that tried to bind an earthquake. God will carry on His own controversy and in His own way.'

‘Yes; but we must help Him,’ said Mr. Sawders firmly, with the air of a divine who felt the Almighty was in pressing need of his assistance, and who was prepared, in an emergency, to prop the Eternal Throne itself on his private shoulders.

With a general laugh, which Mr. Sawders thought was very ill-mannered and unnecessary, the little group proceeded to break up.

One member of the party had, so far, been silent. It was Mr. Looker, who had just retired from the headship of a large private school in the town, and still regarded mankind at large as a class of undeveloped boys. His face was a sort of spider-web of wrinkles, his eyes full of shrewdest humour. He was accustomed to say that he found life ‘as good as a play’; and it was certainly the case that he sat at it like a spectator, looking with equal eyes at all conflicts and all parties, and extracting enjoyment, of an arid sort, from them all. He did nothing himself, his enemies said, and jested at everything anybody else did. This, however, was both unkind and inaccurate. Mr. Looker’s humour was certainly of a sly and biting quality; but he had a very useful office. He resembled the Chorus in a Greek play, and was given to sum up a situation, a dispute, or an incident in some expressive phrase, often to the actors themselves of a very illuminating, if uncomfortable, quality.

‘The fact is,’ he said, ‘you can’t agree on a common policy amongst yourselves. Each of you looks at some little separate angle of truth, and so it wears a different aspect to you all, and you can’t fight a common battle for it. And what a satire it is on all your teaching that your flocks can be whistled away from you with a few pretty phrases by Mr. Gifford!

You've left their heads, as you found them, empty ! And yet you've been pumping sermons into them at the rate of two every Sunday all their lives ; and at the end of the process they are as empty as they were at the beginning !

'The specific gravity of a sermon,' he went on, with the air of a scientist discussing the properties of some new metal, 'is something tremendous. Platinum isn't in it with an orthodox discourse of the usual dimensions ! And yet its substance, to judge by results, is mere wind-blown fog ! It disappears, like fog, with a change of temperature ! What's become of all the sermons you've expended on your hearers, Mr. Sawders, when they march off, in swarms, in this fashion, to Mr. Gifford ?'

But Mr. Sawders walked off indignantly, declining to answer. No wonder Mr. Looker was unpopular !

CHAPTER III

A PLATFORM DUEL

MR. SAWDERS by bent of nature and by confirmed habit was a disputant. Religion, for him, was a dialectical exercise. He had taken Doubt as his special foe, and he wrestled with it victoriously every Sunday, beneath the admiring, if somewhat drowsy, gaze of his congregation. Mr. Sawders had a robust faith in his own controversial powers. His controversial victories were many. His pamphlet on *The Genesis of an Agnostic*, it is true, had only a limited circulation; but it had been favourably reviewed by the local paper, in whose columns it had been freely advertised, at much cost to Mr. Sawders's own pocket.

Mr. Looker, indeed, was apt to offer uncomfortably humorous remarks about Mr. Sawders' pulpit victories over Doubt. 'When you first evolve your own heretic, Sawdust'—he was on sufficiently familiar terms to use, in private, this version of Mr. Sawders's name—'and fit him up with a heresy of duly refutable quality, it is easy to take his theological scalp.'

But Mr. Sawders treated such remarks with the scorn their frivolity deserved. Had he not, in numerous sermons, corrected Professor Huxley's science, exposed

the historical blunders of Renan, and convicted Strauss of gross metaphysical ignorance? When had he failed in these pulpit combats? And why should he fail in the duel he contemplated?

His imagination pictured the crowded audience, the triumphant sweep of his own logic, the shouts of applause, the shattered arguments—the flying figure—of his foe! Why should he not break on the vision of an admiring world as a theological St. George, in spectacles and a white necktie, triumphantly slaying—with his umbrella—the Dragon of Doubt? So, greatly daring, Mr. Sawders addressed to Mr. Gifford a challenge to public debate, for one or more nights, and offered his own church as the scene of the combat.

There was an unconscious prudence in this latter proposal. Environment counts for much, and Mr. Sawders felt instinctively that he would be braver, as well as safer, in his own familiar pulpit than on some entirely strange arena.

The answer came back with almost disconcerting promptitude. Mr. Gifford himself, except under pressure, was not combative. He hated personal debate, and had no gifts for it. Imaginative and iris-tinted rhetoric was his forte; and he declined the combat. Mr. Gifford's refusal to wrestle with Mr. Sawders in public debate caused neither surprise nor regret in the minds of his committee. They knew their man, and knew that he had the defects of his qualities. At bottom he was honest, and he was a gentleman. He could not do a consciously unfair thing. He had both too much self-respect and too little controversial cleverness, to be capable of riding off triumphantly from a serious theological debate, on the back of

some poor little conundrum such as 'Who was Cain's wife?'

But Mr. Stumps was available. He was eager, indeed, to have one more chance of fame, and was exactly the man for such a fight—and such an opponent—as was proposed. He knew all the tricks of debate, and he realized perfectly the chances that such a contest offered. An unhappy divine, dragged from the shelter of his pulpit, and set on a pair of bewildered legs before a hostile crowd, and called to cross wits with an antagonist who granted nothing, not even the multiplication-table, was mere helpless prey to a gentleman of Mr. Stumps's arts. It was a combat betwixt a jelly-fish and a shark!

So a letter was promptly sent to Mr. Sawders, saying 'the state of Mr. Gifford's health' prevented him accepting the offered challenge, but Mr. Stumps would represent the Freethought Association in the debate. The Freethought Committee, quite as shrewdly as Mr. Sawders, knew the importance of drawing their enemy out into unfamiliar ground. 'Neutral ground,' they said, 'must be chosen as the scene of the encounter,' and they proposed that the debate should be held in the local theatre.

Mr. Sawders, as he read the letter, believed that Mr. Gifford was flying before the first preliminary flourish of his dialectical umbrella. The business of routing the little red-nosed and shabby-coated Mr. Stumps was simple and easy. So, with fatal rashness, Mr. Sawders accepted the terms and the antagonist offered him.

Every vacant wall in Middleford soon announced, in flaring posters, the approaching tournament, Mr.

Sawders, with a sort of terror-flavoured delight, saw his name thus proclaimed to the world as the Champion of Christianity. Sometimes, indeed, he felt inclined to take the next train, and fly anywhere, so that he could escape the notoriety which had befallen him. Sometimes that very notoriety half intoxicated him. Mr. Looker's comment was certainly not very encouraging.

'Sawdust,' he said, 'you're flying in the face of Nature. Whatever may have been her unkindness to you, she never intended you to play the part of a clown in a circus. A clown, however,' he added meditatively, surveying Mr. Sawders with a cheerful eye, 'does add to the joy of mankind, so the evening won't be altogether wasted! Whether the clown himself enjoys the performance is, however, I understand, open to doubt.'

Mr. Sawders's ministerial friends disapproved of his rashness, and stood aloof from the fray. This, however, left Mr. Sawders himself undiscouraged. As a matter of fact, the presence of a minister in his audience usually left his genius rebuked. His rhetoric soared with bolder wing when the eye of no clerical brother watched its flight.

The fateful night came at last; the building was packed. The average Englishman loves a fight, even if it is only one of words. Mr. Sawders, as he rose to his feet to open the debate on 'Is the Bible a Divine Revelation?' felt that the moment was historic. The lists were set; the heralds' trumpets were ringing. The famous tournament of Ashby-de-la-Zouch was being translated into theological terms!

But the next moment, as he contemplated the audience

through his spectacles, he was seized with a sudden doubt as to his wisdom in undertaking such a task, on such a field, and before such a jury. It was a disconcerting audience ; not yet, as a whole, actively hostile, perhaps, but derisive and captious. The sea of faces bore no resemblance to the reposeful visages on which Mr. Sawders was accustomed to gaze from the elevation of his own pulpit, and which looked back at him with eyes full of drowsy respect. The faces were those of an audience determined to have a 'good time,' and quite indifferent as to whose cost. They were the faces of a crowd at a circus, waiting for the clown. And it would be ill for the clown if his jokes didn't come up to expectations.

Poor Mr. Sawders had his little scheme of proofs carefully drawn out in notes. All his modest theological library was melted down and poured into his argument. Angus's *Bible Handbook* gave it at least an air of erudition. Paley supplied it with logic, Pope with philosophy, Henry Rogers with humour, Joseph Parker with sentiment. His argument began with Butler and *Pearson on the Creed*, and ended with Joseph Cook and the *Boston Lectures*. But then, alas ! neither Butler nor Pearson ever had to adjust his argument to such an audience as that on which Mr. Sawders looked, with disquieted eyes. He felt, with a swift, alarmed, and perspiring certainty which astonished himself, that the logic which had seemed so triumphant in his own study would awaken from such a jury no other response than laughter.

But he must make a start. He tried to escape from his own pulpit tone, and shouted, with a quite unsuccessful attempt to be at ease :

'My friends ! I will begin with the *a priori* argument

for revelation ' ; and he proceeded to build up a fabric of syllogisms on the summit of which the Bible was to be triumphantly perched.

But somehow his intellect seemed frozen. He struggled on, with failing memory, brain that refused to think, and a tongue that seemed to swell moment by moment, till it threatened to choke him ; while the audience, with that malign insight which every audience, somehow, possesses, read his trouble, grinned at his verbal blunders, and filled up his involuntary pauses with ironical applause.

At last the time allowed for his opening address was exhausted, the chairman's bell rang, and Mr. Sawders sank into his chair, with the dimmest possible notion of what he had been saying, or what stage of his argument he had reached.

Then the time for Mr. Stumps came. He rose, alert, hard-featured, lank-haired, with one eye set at a hostile angle to the other, and a voice that had not a pleasant note in it, but which pierced to the remotest edge of the audience like a knife. The opportunity was one which showed Mr. Stumps at his best, and he could have desired no more absolutely helpless victim than the unhappy Sawders. Mr. Stumps was a walking magazine of cavils and objections, all flavoured with sly satire, and made slab and thick with home-spun illustrations and scraps of science. He was rich in stories, told in dialect, which, if they were often vulgar, were also edged with a disconcerting amount of wit. He affected a blunt, down-right common sense.

' My concern,' he shouted, ' is not where the Bible comes from, but what it is. It is here, a thing to be touched, handled, read, criticized. What sort of a book

is it? It runs its stupid head against science. It asks us to believe that the world was built and fitted up betwixt Monday morning and Saturday night; that man was made out of red mud, and woman out of man's rib. Gentlemen,' he cried, 'does my reverend and learned friend really hold that Mrs. Sawders is nothing but a rib-bone extracted from her husband's side, a mere inconspicuous and not too dignified fragment of himself?'

Here the audience roared, while Mrs. Sawders, a lady of generous dimensions, a Roman nose, and an emphatic temper, who sat immediately in front of the platform, glared wrathfully at the unabashed Mr. Stumps. Poor Mr. Sawders! Into what a stream of evil-smelling dialectical waters had he plunged! The local town ditch itself was sweetness compared to it.

The chairman's bell rang. Mr. Stumps subsided into his chair, wiping his perspiring brow with a triumphant air, and Mr. Sawders rose reluctantly to 'reply.' He could only cling in helpless despair to his manuscript.

'I now come,' he said, 'to the external proofs of the Bible.'

But 'the external proofs' seemed to have emigrated from the chambers of Mr. Sawders's brain. He stumbled on, lost in a distracted labyrinth of tangled dates and disordered history, and came to an end even before the chairman's bell rang.

Then Mr. Stumps rose, to trample on his already vanquished foe. He felt on sufficiently friendly terms with his audience by this time to borrow the trick of Mr. Sawders's own friends, and transformed his opponent's name unblushingly into 'Sawdust,' a jest which immensely tickled his hearers.

The domestic arrangements of the patriarchs supplied Mr. Stumps with a fruitful text for much broad humour.

‘Abraham was “the friend of God.” But what about that little business with Hagar?’ Then, with that irreverent and disconcerting trick of making a personal application of his arguments, Mr. Stumps demanded, ‘What would Mrs. Sawdust say if she discovered her husband introducing patriarchal usages into the Sawdust household?’ Whereupon, Mrs. Sawders, a lady, as we have said, of strong feelings and unrivalled power of expressing them—in look and gesture, as well as in words—grew red and rigid with wrath, and glared at her husband as if the hint were a revelation to her. Mr. Sawders’s eyes met those of his wife, and domestic authority instantly asserted itself. The unhappy divine’s face wore a look so visibly apologetic and alarmed that the audience, catching the by-play with malign shrewdness, roared afresh.

‘What had the Bible done for the world?’ demanded Mr. Stumps. ‘It had given the world the Inquisition, which had burnt some 25,000 victims. It had set witch-fires blazing over all Europe; and in Bible-ridden Scotland alone, with its scanty population, were not 5,000 witches burned betwixt 1580 and 1680? Dare even Mr. Sawdust deny these “facts”?’ Poor Mr. Sawders dare do nothing.

At this point Mr. Sawders was called upon for a third instalment of his argument in defence of the Bible. He rose reluctantly, a consciously beaten man; he stared in mute despair at the sea of jeering faces before him. Here and there a familiar face, with a quite unfamiliar expression upon it, became, for a moment, recognizable. He caught a glimpse of his

principal deacon, with amazed concern written on every line of his broad face. He saw the grim features of Mrs. Sawders, stony with indignation.

Memory, by this time, was bankrupt. The lines of his notes had melted into vapour. He held in his hand the manuscript on which he had bestowed such loving toil; but, as he tried to read them, the words seemed to dance in a derisive waltz across the paper at which he stared.

To do him justice, Mr. Sawders did not think solely, or even chiefly, of himself and of his own dialectical defeat. He had undertaken to produce an argumentative justification for Christianity which would satisfy a frivolous and jesting crowd; and he lacked the gifts for the task. He had dishonoured a great cause. He looked once more at the mosaic of grinning and scornful faces before him. Argument he had none. But a sudden impulse drove him once more to speak, and something in his voice—some new note of humility and of reality—sent a momentary hush across the jeering crowd.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘I cannot swop anecdotes and jeers with your representative. But,’ he cried—and as he spoke his voice took depth, there came a new carriage to his head, and his somewhat shambling and ignoble figure grew erect—‘my cause is good, my creed is true, and you all know it! What does he represent,’ he demanded, pointing his finger sternly at the triumphant Mr. Stumps, ‘but a shabby gospel of Denial, a gospel of Despair? Suppose I can’t here and now, in the jesting fashion you want, prove Christianity to be divine. Its works prove it! It’s the one hope of the world. It makes rogues honest, and drunkards sober. It has made Smith’s Close almost respectable.’

Here the spell of the orator's eloquence failed, and he vanished, submerged beneath a flood of exultant yells, while Mr. Stumps sprang to his feet and proceeded to execute a rhetorical war-dance on the body of his prostrate foe.

As John Blunt, a member of the Freethought Committee, pushed his way through the noisy groups on the steps of the theatre, he found himself beside a fellow workman, David Christie, a hard-headed and devout Scotchman.

'Well, John,' he said, 'yon's a poor creature! No wonder your man made mincemeat of him. But why didn't he stick to facts: to the experimental side of things? His poor little bits of "external" and "internal" proof fly away wi' him! The only "proof" Christianity wants is the fact that it makes bad men good. Will your new gospel do that, John?'

'Why not?' asked John sturdily.

'Well,' answered David Christie, 'when ye can show a drunken rogue made a decent man by it, then you may begin to talk. Can you make drunken Tom Oxley stop beating his wife with your gospel of an unknowable God? Was there ever, on the face of the planet,' demanded David, waxing energetic, 'a tribe of cannibals converted to decent diet and decent morals by a committee of atheists or of agnostics? John, man, it's easy to destroy. If ye gie worms time enough they will bring down Windsor Castle—and be only worms at the end o' it. I am thinking ye are doing worms' work, my man! And why should the world thank you for that?'

Poor Mr. Sawders suffered most, perhaps, when, the day after the debate, he met Mr. Looker. That gentle-

man grinned upon him with an air of the frankest enjoyment.

‘Well, Mr. Sawders,’ he said affably, ‘are you able to settle the question now, of whether the clown enjoys the performance as much as the spectators do?’

CHAPTER IV

KATE ARDEN

THERE had been a pleasant gathering of friends at the Ardens', and the guests, after wandering in the long summer twilight on the garden paths, were taking their leave. Cecil Sparks still lingered, while Kate bade farewell to her friends. She would be alone presently, and he was determined to try his fortune as a lover with her.

The moonlight lay clear and white on the garden as Kate, with bent and pensive brow and lingering feet, walked down the gravel path. The moonlight, soft, yet keen, made the garden a sort of fairy realm. Far off, a nightingale sang. In the sky above, the stars hung faint in a flood of milky light. Below, a hundred flowers—their tints bleached and softened in the moonlight—filled the air with scent. The very night seemed

drunken with the stolen scents
Of sleeping pinks : heavy with kisses snatched
From roses.

At the end of the path a great chestnut-tree—a stately, wide-based pyramid of whispering leaves—made, with its shadow, a pool of inky blackness in the white radiance of the night.

As the slender, graceful figure, clad in white, a dainty

curve of lace thrown over the rich hair, passed into the shadow of the tree, it seemed to be swallowed up. Beyond, in the leafy doorway of the arbour, stood Cecil, watching, with eager eyes, the girlish figure, with downward-bent head, as it came slowly toward him.

Kate Arden was a girl that might well stir an even finer and more spiritual imagination than Cecil possessed. A womanly figure, yet slender, and poised so daintily, moving with a step so quick and sure, and with so exquisite a balance of head and neck and foot, that it seemed slenderer than it really was. The lines of the face were pure, the cheek thin. The charm lay in the level eyebrows ; in the deep blue eyes, keen and humorous, yet tender ; in the wide, low brow, with its piled mass of rich brown hair ; in the expressive and sensitive lips ; in the flower-like complexion, in which the vivid colour came and went with every pulse or changing emotion. Kate's smile, with its gleam of humorous eyes, its tender lips, its sudden revelation of pearly teeth, was a flash of human sunlight.

And Nature, in some rare mood of generosity, had given Kate a voice so soft and low, yet rich, that its syllables ran in music. The delighted ear hung on them. Her voice was the perfect vehicle of a spirit tender, frank, and brave. When deeply moved, the tones deepened and took a strange, rich fullness. In merriment they ran up with something of the clear carol of the lark. She might easily have become a famous singer. As it was she was a simple maiden, of winsomeness all compact ; who, as wife, would make home a heaven to her husband, and, as mother, would be worshipped by her children. Other girls, beside her, seemed bleached and commonplace.

Kate herself was wholly unconscious of the distinction she derived from the set of her head, the play of her sensitive lips, and the vivid, softly flushing charm of her face. She was beautiful without knowing it. And her charm reached its culminating point in her character. Religion came to her as if by direct and divine gift. It was the breath of her life; a soft and divine fire that gave a new light to her eyes, a richer note to her voice, an added sweetness to her laugh. From the breath of her morning prayer she came out to her household duties with some inner sunshine burning through her face as through a veil. It is recorded of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration that, as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was changed; 'His face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light.' That miracle is also a parable. Prayer puts a Mount of Transfiguration in every life; and from it man or maid may come to the commonplace duties of life with shining face and clean garments. This was the gracious miracle wrought daily in Kate's life.

Religion attenuates some women. It lowers their temperature. It puts acid in their blood, and narrowness in their brains; it makes censures easy on their lips, and smiles rare. Tennyson used to tell of a sourly Calvinistic aunt 'who would weep for hours because God was so infinitely good.' 'Has He not damned,' she cried, 'most of my friends? But *me, me* He has picked out for eternal salvation.' 'Alfred, Alfred,' she one day said to young Tennyson, 'when I look at you I think of the words of Holy Scripture, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire."' What is mistaken for religion does teach some women—and many men—to look on their kind with eyes like this.

But for Kate religion had fulfilled its natural office, the office of sunshine to a flower, giving it colour, perfume, growth.

Such a girl naturally drew the gaze of many worshipping eyes. Smears' eyes dwelt on her as though she had been a saint, nimbus-crowned, who had just stepped out of the canvas of one of Fra Angelico's pictures. Kit worshipped her with silent, dogged, half-adoring love, a love that found no speech and cherished no hope. Kate read, with a girl's subtle instinct, Kit's secret, and answered it with sisterly kindness and soft, sudden glances of pity ; a treatment which chilled poor Kit's spirit almost more effectually than a direct refusal could have done.

Kate moved to and fro, busied with her work in home and church, with her maiden fancy free and untouched. But Cecil, the most enterprising of her worshippers, with his dark, vivid face and caressing voice, seemed at times to disturb her virginal calm. Her cheeks flushed when they met. Her voice took a yet richer note as they talked together. Cecil, who never lacked audacity, had tried hard to win Kate ; but her spirit—frank, yet coy and subtle, and with depths beyond his sounding—seemed to evade him. Her eyes would linger on his face, half in tenderness, half in pensive, questioning scrutiny, as he urged his suit. He had held her hand, soft and warm, yet with strength under its softness ; and it fluttered in his grasp.

But his lips had never yet found their way to her cool cheek. She seemed to him like some shy, swift-winged bird, that still flew skyward as he tried to capture it. They were 'Cecil' and 'Kate' to each other ; for the two households had been friendly for a generation ; but whether she loved him was a question

which would have puzzled Kate herself to answer, almost as much as it would have puzzled Cecil.

He was a lover indeed to fill a maiden's eyes and flatter her imagination. The trouble was that, with Kate, eye and fancy were but servants to keener and nobler faculties. Something, she felt, was missing in Cecil; she knew not what, and had never yet tried to analyse.

Then came Mr. Gifford's advent, and the whole world of Middleford adjusted itself to this new factor. Cecil's early and complete surrender to this new apostle's eloquence, and to the strange gospel it proclaimed, sorely distressed Kate. She realized its whole significance, with a woman's quick instinct, better than Cecil did himself. Tears were rare to her eyes, for all their wistful tenderness; but she had wept in solitude some of those tears which only God sees, as she watched the light of Christian faith—such as it was—fade out of Cecil's life, and his quick and eager intellect yield itself almost gladly to Mr. Gifford's melancholy and perilous creed.

The genesis of his unbelief was intelligible enough. His father was vicar of St. Silas's—or, rather, of 'S. Silas's'—a whole ecclesiastical firmament, in Mr. Sparks' view, parted 'S.' from 'St.,' as the correct abbreviation of the word 'Saint.' A person guilty of describing 'S. Silas' as 'St. Silas,' would, in his judgement, be capable of mutilating the Athanasian Creed! For Mr. Sparks was a sacerdotalist of the most advanced type. That he was a true successor of the apostles he had no doubt. He was a human pipe, through which, by a sort of miraculous plumbing, flowed supernatural grace. He looked on all non-Episcopalians as a good Jew regarded a Samaritan. He would have bathed

seven times in running water, and have counted himself ceremonially unclean, if he had strayed by any chance into a dissenting 'chapel.'

Now, to Cecil's secular temper, his father's sacerdotalism had a flavour of the ridiculous. The faithful of S. Silas's saw their vicar robed in parti-coloured garments, and through an atmosphere of incense. Cecil saw his father with his robes off and in the hard daylight. He had heard him storm, with quite unsaintly vehemence, at an underdone chop, or at the insufficiently starched condition of one of his beloved robes.

His mother might have been a steady spiritual force in Cecil's life, and she loved her son passionately. But her love defeated itself. It was of a worrying, agitated, and agitating type, and acted much as a blister on its object. She could extract a tragedy as dark as that of Oedipus from a broken saucer. She clothed herself with worries as with a garment. Every trouble became gigantic and hopeless the moment her hand touched it.

Now, Cecil had a temperament that hated agitations, and delighted only in the pleasant side of things. The atmosphere of worry that hung perpetually round his mother, added to what he looked upon as the absurd and utterly incredible sacerdotalism of his father, drove him to seek a pleasanter environment than he found beneath the household roof. His hunger for pleasure was starved there. Curiosity drew him to listen to Mr. Gifford, and that gentleman's eloquence was to Cecil a revelation. It set to music, moreover, a creed which exactly suited Cecil's tastes. It was above all things pleasant. 'Freedom' was its first and last word. There was no imprisoning circle of stern law, no pursuing and inevitable penalty for sin.

Mr. Gifford had held the sacerdotal version of Christianity up to special ridicule. Its robes, he argued, were but heathen survivals. Its ideas represented an unconscious heathenism more completely than even its robes.

The sacerdotalist declared all varieties of religion save his own mere shams. Mr. Gifford accepted the first half of that proposition, and then argued that the sacerdotalist himself was demonstrably the greatest sham of them all. And Cecil, with unfilial readiness, accepted the demonstration! It was, indeed, but the paternal conclusion a little bit enlarged. Great was the joy in the Freethought Committee-room when it was announced that 'the parson's son' was numbered amongst the followers of Mr. Gifford.

Both Cecil and Kate felt unconsciously that their relations were nearing a crisis. Cecil was urging his suit—more than once met with a soft refusal—with resolute ardour. Curiously enough, the gentle and serene certainty of Kate's faith had a subtle charm for him. He did not want an agnostic wife. He felt that his affections would be a little safer if they rested in the heart of a woman not quite so 'emancipated' as himself. He was bent on winning Kate, and feared that if he delayed making sure of her they might drift apart. That Kate's feet lingered, and her brows wore a pensive look, as she moved down the garden, was due to the troubled sense that to-night matters betwixt Cecil and herself must be decided.

CHAPTER V

KATE AND CECIL

CECIL watched Kate approaching with eager eyes. She seemed so slender and so fair that his heart leaped up at the vision. Tennyson's passionate lines somehow began to sing themselves over in his brain :

She is coming, my own, my sweet,
Were it ever so airy a tread
My heart would hear her, and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed.

Then, as he watched, she seemed to vanish in the shadow of the great chestnut, swallowed up in its blackness ; and a chill fell on Cecil's heart. Was that the sign of a darker eclipse which was to hide a star so fair from him for ever ? But now Kate emerged into the light again. The moonlight lay on her hair and eyes. It seemed to clothe her in some robe woven of fairy-tissue. She made a vision so soft and gracious that Cecil's imagination broke into sudden fire. He forgot all he had intended to say. Kate started at the passion that thrilled in his voice as he called her name. Then the quick, hurried, eager syllables broke from his lips :

‘Kate, I love you ! I love you ! I want you !’

That sudden appeal shook her. No girl's ears could have listened to such a sound—a lover's voice, made deep and broken with passion—and not have quivered.

But Kate drew back from her lover's flushed and stooping face.

'No, no,' she said, with some agitation.

Cecil went on, with hurrying, passionate speech, urging his plea; but still she drew back. Cecil felt instinctively that her shy, coy, and virginal spirit escaped him. Into the tumult of his mind there shot a sudden gleam of anger.

'She's as dainty as moonlight,' he said to himself, 'and as cold.'

Then he looked at her again. A glow had stolen into her cheek, a star-like gleam into her eyes. She could be, for the man who won her, mere embodied sunshine, all soft radiance and fire. But his lips, somehow, had not learned the transfiguring word.

Kate was still silent. Her head drooped lower. Her hand slipped from Cecil's. The truth was, Cecil's vehement appeal had not merely startled her; it roused her deeper nature. It served as a sort of precipitating shock to a hundred vague moral alarms. It brought her face to face with what she realized, in one swift breathless instant, was a moral issue.

'No, Cecil, no. Not yet!' she said softly, while her voice trembled. But frankness was native to her. 'Whether I love you I don't know,' she went on, after a pause. 'Perhaps I could,' she said, with an exquisite thrill in her voice. 'But, Cecil, I dare not.'

'Dare not?' cried Cecil, astonished. 'Can't you trust me, Kate?'

'Cecil,' she began—then she hesitated, while her lover pressed her with hurried and broken words.

'Ah, Cecil,' she said, while her lips quivered. 'You have separated yourself from everything I hold sacred: from Jesus Christ and all He is and means.'

Cecil experienced a sudden chill to find that his talk with the girl he was eager to win was drifting into such unwelcome realms.

‘Don’t let us discuss theology, Kate. Haven’t we something sweeter and better to talk about? I love you!’

‘But there’s a gulf betwixt us. You reject Jesus Christ, and I’—here her voice thrilled—‘I love Him! I owe Him every thought. We are on different sides.’

‘No, Kate; if I believed that He existed, that His story was true, I would worship Him as earnestly as you do. But, then, I am convinced He never existed.’ Then his youthful, arrogant unbelief asserted itself. ‘Christianity, at best,’ he said, ‘is only a dream—a priestly dream. You would not have me pretend a love for what I am sure is only a myth?’

‘No, Cecil! No. That would be worse than unbelief itself. But,’ she went on with deepening voice, ‘if I must remain unloved and unmated to my dying hour, I cannot give my life to one who rejects Jesus Christ.’

‘You are sweeter to me, Kate, for your obstinate faith; I would not have you otherwise. I reverence you for your very religion, though it is not mine. But if I waive my creed for you, why cannot you waive yours for me? After all, there are other things than religion to think about. There is love, and life, and happiness.’

‘But for me,’ said Kate softly, ‘religion is love, and life, and happiness. And it’s more than all these put together. It’s duty. No, Cecil! I would not give up Jesus Christ, and all He means, for anything under heaven, or in heaven. And to marry you would be, to my conscience, an act of disloyalty to Christ.’

They had stepped out of the deep shadow of the tree, and stood in the moonlight. Kate lifted her eyes to her lover's face. She had never before seemed to him so fair. The white moonlight gave a more star-like gleam to her eyes and a new beauty to her features. It seemed the face of an angel on which he looked ! In his heart Cecil cursed the scruples that kept him from winning such a prize.

'Why punish me,' he asked, 'for my unbelief?'

But Kate, with a woman's sure instinct, felt that there was a false note in Cecil's unbelief. He did not give up the Christian faith with grief and reluctance, mourning, as any honest heart might well mourn, that a hope so fair was proved to be false, and feeling that the loss left the world half bankrupt. Cecil was, half unconsciously, glad to find that religion might be put aside as an exploded force ; glad to feel he could dismiss Christianity, as an idle myth, from his thoughts. He moved with a freer and lighter step, like a man released from some imprisoning bond, after his change of creed. Christianity was, to him, an uncomfortable fact. He knew it only by its restraints. It was a relief to find that it was resolved into vapour.

The dim sense of all this chilled Kate's heart ; for she was saint and woman both. And Cecil felt that behind her deep, tender, softly breathed syllables was an immutable resolve. At bottom he cherished a sort of rough male contempt for the feminine conscience. That a barrier so flimsy should rise betwixt him and the maiden he saw to be so fair kindled a sudden anger in him. His pride was stung ; yet he knew that if he gave way to temper his case was lost.

'Kate,' he said, after a pause, 'you might win me to your faith if you married me.'



'WHY PUNISH ME,' HE ASKED, 'FOR MY UNBELIEF?'



‘And would my poor face bribe you to accept Christ?’ she asked, with a pitiful smile. ‘He would not take you on those terms, my poor Cecil. Would you respect me if I sold my conscience? Could I respect myself? No; I will pray for you, I shall always pray for you; but we cannot be lovers.’

Now, when a maiden tells her rejected lover she will ‘pray for him,’ masculine pride is apt to take sulky offence.

‘Spare me your prayers, Kate,’ he said. ‘They are idle. They may soothe you, they won’t change me. All the world,’ he added, with a touch of boastfulness, ‘will think to-morrow as I do.’

‘That won’t alter me,’ was Kate’s steadfast and low-spoken answer.

‘If you loved me,’ Cecil went on passionately, ‘you would not sacrifice me for a scruple; and sacrifice me because I am honest.’

Kate tried to say that religion to her was something more than a ‘scruple’; but Cecil went on impetuously:

‘I would have given you my life, but you fling me away for what you call your conscience. I don’t quite know what “conscience” means to you; but my brain is my conscience, and I cannot give the lie to my own brain. On your own theory of religion you might have done me some good. But you won’t take the risk,’ he said, with bitter emphasis. ‘You won’t risk yourself to help me.’

‘I won’t do what I feel to be wrong,’ she said softly.

‘Wrong!’ he answered passionately. ‘Love knows no right or wrong.’

‘But that is not what I mean by love—and,’ she added with deepened voice, ‘I shall never know that for any one on earth.’

Cecil stood for a moment silent. His eyes dwelt hungrily on the graceful figure before him, with its pure brow and clear features, on which the softening moonlight lay like a benediction. Anger struggled with love in his breast ; and the fiercer passion triumphed.

‘Good-bye,’ he said abruptly, ‘since our paths must run in opposite directions. You are sacrificing love and happiness for a shadow. You can’t know what love is. Good-bye,’ he repeated roughly, but with broken voice.

Kate stood and looked after him till the sound of his feet died away, while the tears ran thick and warm down her cheeks. Yet she was sure she had done right. Did she love Cecil? She could not tell. But to be loyal to her creed, and to Jesus Christ, who was the centre of her creed, was the first necessity of her nature. She could not set in the most sacred chamber of her affection one who thrust Christ out of his life as an impertinence, or as a myth.

Meanwhile, as Cecil hurried away, he acknowledged to himself, with an unspoken curse, that Smears’ query, ‘What about Kate Arden?’ had found a bitter answer. The new theology acted as a test and a solvent to old relationships. And in his secret heart Cecil acknowledged this ought to be so.

CHAPTER VI

A HAPLESS SUITOR

MR. ARDEN was the manager of the leading bank in Middleford. Cecil held a poor position in his office ; and Mr. Arden who had consented to Cecil's interview with Kate, learned of its failure with a touch of anger. A youth so keen-witted and bright and swift was sure to go far, and would be a desirable husband for Kate. Mr. Arden, too, had come to lean on Cecil, whose marriage with Kate would have been a relief to him. As they met the next morning in the bank office, Cecil's brow told the story of his failure. Defeat was written in characters of anger on every line of his face.

'Then you failed, Cecil?' asked Mr. Arden.

'Yes, sir,' he said, and his rankling anger gave bitterness to his speech. 'Kate thinks more of her own soul than any one else's happiness. A parson would suit her ; or,' he added, with a sudden impulse of jealous anger that surprised himself, 'say, that very correct young gentleman, Kit Somers.'

Mr. Arden's brow darkened.

'What,' he cried, 'that lout !'

'He's no lout, sir,' said Cecil reluctantly ; 'but he's too good for this wicked world.'

'Well, Kate,' said Mr. Arden to his daughter, as they

sat at the tea-table in the evening ; 'you have sent Cecil Sparks about his business.'

'Yes,' replied Kate, half sadly.

'One can never tell what a girl wants,' Mr. Arden went on angrily ; 'she does not know herself. What finer fellow could you imagine than Cecil?'

'Don't let us discuss him, father,' answered Kate softly. 'I suppose a girl has her own judgement, which she can't, perhaps, explain, but which she must follow.'

'Well, you will have your own way,' replied her father sulkily ; 'you always do. But don't let that Puritanic fellow, young Somers, come about here too much. You have too much wit, surely, to endure such a soft-headed idiot.'

Was Kit 'soft'? Can a lover be too lowly-minded, and suffer in his lady's eyes as a result of that grace? This was perhaps the case with Kit. A note of reverence ran through his love for Kate. Her dainty grace ; the look of her pure eyes ; the music of her voice, that made every syllable a delight ; her quick brain ; the sense she gave of rich and vivid life, of remoteness from everything commonplace—all this abashed him. The touch of her cool fingers set his blood tingling. She seemed to have broken out of some rich and pure realm upon the commonplace earth. Kate read the worshipping note in Kit's love, and she had enough of the natural woman in her to half enjoy it and be half exasperated by it. Kit put her on a pedestal ; and a pedestal is not, after all, a permanently comfortable seat for untranslated human nature.

From his boyhood Kit had been Kate Arden's slave. She ruled him with more than queenly authority. To bid him go or come, at her pleasure, and with a

whisper or a gesture, had become a habit; and at bottom a girl expects, and admires, a note of mastery in a lover. Occasionally, indeed, the stronger side of Kit's character would flash out, and temporarily reduce Kate's queenship to mere ruins. The docile, smiling lad, with a look of doglike affection in his eyes, would, on occasion, suddenly show himself a hero of a very imperious and warlike type.

Kate remembered vividly one such incident of her girlish days. Walking light-footed along a lonely road, betwixt hedges rich in tangled sprays and blossoms, two rough pedestrians had stopped her, and begged, in somewhat peremptory tones. Kate took out her purse; the eyes of one of the louts gleamed, and he suddenly snatched it from her. His comrade plucked away the slender gold chain which hung round her neck, and commenced, with rough fingers, to unfasten her brooch. She was struggling, white-faced and desperate, but mute, with the pair. Suddenly there was a sound of running feet, the rush of a human body, the crack of a furious blow. One rough went down as though from the stroke of an aerolite. His mate turned with an oath, then hastily put up his hands, and stepped back.

Kit stood there, a figure of wrath and battle! He did not glance at Kate. With grimly set lips, and eyes that flashed like steel, he took a step towards the second of the two roughs, fainted, and leaped in on him. There was a lightning-like exchange of blows, and then the second rough went down with such violence that he rolled over and over again. Kit stood, poised, with frowning face, his clenched fist drawn back, as though in act to strike, waiting till his foe gathered himself up.

The first man, meanwhile, was sitting up, fingering his bruised jaw tenderly, while he spat out blood and teeth and curses. Then he glanced up at the contending figures. A baleful fire of revenge kindled in his eyes. He staggered up, pulled out a huge clasp-knife, opened its dirty but formidable blade, and crept towards Kit.

Kate had sunk half fainting to the ground, and was watching the two figures before her. Kit still stood, a mere image of combat, lightly balanced, with hands drawn back, ready to leap or strike. Was this the tame and docile lad who went and came at her bidding, and was a sort of sensitive human mirror for her smiles? Kate felt a wave of half-terrified amazement sweep through her as she saw the lines of power in Kit's figure, and read the sternness of battle in his frowning brow. But the first rogue, knife in hand, was creeping up; and Kate watched him, frozen almost dumb with terror.

'Kit,' she cried, in a voice that sounded strange in her own ears.

He turned, and in the very act of turning he seemed to leap on the murderous wretch with the knife. The rogue fled in sheer terror; his comrade, too, by this time had crept away, and was taking to his heels.

'Oh, Kit,' gasped Kate, 'you frightened me. You looked as though you would have killed them.'

'So I would,' he replied promptly, and turned his head with a look of unquenched rage at the two fast-vanishing figures.

'Why, Kit, there is murder in your look.'

'Well,' he replied, with a sudden and ludicrous plunge into half-ashamed apology, 'why did they touch you?'

Then he kindled again. His eyes flashed ; he half turned, as though to start in wrathful pursuit of his enemies.

‘No, Kit ; don’t leave me,’ said Kate meekly, cowed by his stern visage.

Here was a sudden revelation of the heroic and the masterful in her too docile lover !

But it passed, and Kit became more completely the slave, and Kate more absolutely the queen, than ever. And to Kate Arden’s eyes, for a time, poor Kit was apt to look bleached and colourless when set against Cecil’s vivid personality and flashing wit. Yet there would come into Kit’s face, on occasions, a sudden look of keenness and power which puzzled Kate. Did she really know him, after all ? He had run—or, rather, plodded—a successful course as an engineering student, had spent three years in a German school of mines, and already held a good post in a great tin-mine. Whether Kate really knew Kit she sometimes doubted ; whether she loved him was a matter still more doubtful. She, herself, if asked, would have said, ‘No.’ Yet she often felt curiously impatient that he let Cecil take the lead on all occasions, and was content to be silent while his comrade dazzled all hearers with his bright talk.

‘Soft’ ? No ! Kit was certainly not that. But he lacked ambition. He did not assert himself. He was content to be second when he might have been first.

But Kit had at last decided to put his fate to the touch. He was offered a post on a South African mine, with a considerable increase of salary. A student chum from Middleford was there already, and was eagerly urging him to come. Yet Kit felt he could

not leave England without knowing definitely how he stood with the girl he had loved so long and so humbly. But that ill-fate which so often pursues the most deserving of lovers still attended Kit.

He called early one afternoon, while Kate was yet sore with pity for Cecil, and that epithet of 'soft,' as applied to Kit, was still tingling in her ears. A lover about to 'propose' does not usually wear a very heroic air, and the more genuine his love the more apt he is to suffer from a too despondent modesty. There is doubt on his brow; his words do not come readily; his mind runs ahead of the stumbling syllables, and leaves them to ramble on unguided.

'Well, Mr. Somers,' said Kate, 'you don't often come to see me at this hour.'

'No, but I wanted to see you alone.'

Kate's quick instinct told her what this meant. Her girl's heart thrilled at the thought of the coming words. Yet she shrank from their utterance. She would have put Kit off with some light jest, some mock assumption of authority; but a glance at his dogged brow told her this was impossible. Her lover meant to have his say, and Kate had a sense of half-angry helplessness as she looked at him.

'I'm not good enough for you, Kate,' he went on. 'No one is,' he added, with conviction. 'But, oh, Kate, I love you,' and his tone conveyed the sense that the sentiment was a decree of fate, a thing inevitable, and one that carried with it a final logic of its own. 'I want our lives to be one.'

Then by an impulse, the audacity of which almost frightened him, he put out his hand to clasp Kate's.

The look on his face startled Kate; there was a

vibration in his voice which set the pulses in her veins leaping, in spite of herself. But she drew back.

‘Kit,’ she answered softly, and with a quiver on her lips, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Yes,’ said Kit doggedly. ‘I know it’s presumption on my part ; but I can’t help it. How could anybody help loving you, Kate ?’ he asked.

Kate half smiled at the doleful way in which her lover proposed this inquiry. Yet she was curiously shaken by it. But then, by some kindred impulse of pity, Cecil’s face rose to her imagination, and one mood of kindness killed the other. Her refusal had cruelly humiliated Cecil ; it would add a new and sharper sting to that humiliation if she accepted another suitor almost immediately after his rejection. Kate’s heart was in a tumult, pity contending with pity. Moreover, she suddenly realized with a sense of half alarm that Kit had a power over her hitherto unsuspected by either of them.

‘Oh, Kit,’ she said unwittingly, ‘why did you come so soon ?’

‘So soon !’ he cried, in uncomprehending wonder. ‘Why,’ he added, half bitterly, ‘I ought to have spoken years ago. I gave others chances I never took myself. “So soon” !’ he went on. ‘But I’ll wait as long as you like, Kate,’ and, dimly feeling that in her exclamation there was some gleam of only half-understood hope, he tried afresh to capture her hand.

‘No, no,’ cried Kate, with much agitation, and angry with herself at that foolish ‘Why did you come so soon ?’ ; ‘No, no, Kit ; I like you, oh, so much and I trust you, but——’ and she hesitated.

Had Kit been a less modest and a more enterprising lover, a little more confident of himself, and a little

more masterful towards her, he might, at that moment, have succeeded. He would have taken Kate, spite of herself, into his arms, and her doubts and self-questionings would have dissolved at the touch of his lips. But he let the golden moment pass.

'No,' said Kate, in firmer tones. 'Why did you change the old relationship betwixt us? We were such friends.'

'Let us be friends at least,' cried poor Kit, in an alarmed voice, giving up, unconsciously, his appeal for a dearer tie. 'I'll not bother you for more, Kate—at least,' he added, with a return of his doggedness, 'not just yet.'

It was a new proof of Kit's modesty—a feminine critic would have said of his simplicity—that, as he walked away from the house, his chief emotion was one of alarm, that he had run the risk of losing Kate's friendship, and astonished gratitude that such a tragedy had been escaped. He felt like a swimmer who had shot Niagara in pursuit of some great prize, and had, at least, escaped being drowned.

'And,' he whispered to himself, with resolute lips, 'I'll win her yet.'

As for Kate, she betook herself to that characteristically feminine refuge, 'a good cry.' Yet what was the exact emotion behind her tears she herself hardly knew. Was it pity for Kit, or pity for herself? She felt stirring in her very blood a mood of feeling towards her rejected lover that almost frightened her. She half realized that, out of soft-hearted pity for a man she did not love, she had rejected the man she did love—or, at least, could love. It was a puzzle and a tragedy.

Then the master habit of her life asserted itself. She

had no mother ; but she had God ! She knelt and cast herself and her life on that Eternal Love which comprehends and pities, and will shape to perfect issues the life committed to it. And into her prayers crept the names of both Cecil and Kit. But Kit's name lingered there longest.

Kit, meanwhile, betook himself that evening to the lonely pier that thrust its rugged length out into the little curving harbour of Middleford. The keen sea air, the whisper of the waves on the brown sands, the curve of the wide sea-horizon, visible beyond the twin black points that guarded the harbour, the gleam of the kindling stars in the deep heavens, the loneliness and silence of it all, made the quiet pier a stage on which Kit could tramp to and fro, and think out, in solitude, his plans, at what he felt was a crisis in his life. Should he accept the offered appointment in South Africa ? If he left Kate with their relations vague and unsettled, as at present, was that not to fling away any chance of winning her ? A more hopeful career, rich in golden prospects, beckoned him to South Africa ; but Kate's face acted like a spell, and held him fast to England.

Presently a graver note crept into his thought. It was a question, not of a career, successful or unsuccessful, not even of winning Kate or of losing her, but of duty and of God's will. 'Lord,' he asked, 'what wilt Thou have me to do ?'

The night grew dim about him ; dim the darkening waters, the far-off sea horizon ; dim the long line of faintly echoing shore, where the foam of the restless waves broke in ghostly white on the brown sands ; dim the wide, immeasurable heavens, where, points of pale flame, the stars hung faint above him. All this

seemed to reflect the dimness that lay on his spirit, where no clear light for the moment shone, and no clear voice spoke.

But Kit had the courageous faith that could wait in silence till some divine Voice spoke.

'I've no clear token yet,' he said to himself, 'but it will come, and I'll wait till it does come.'

It was to come—though not yet—in a shape, and from a quarter, of which Kit little dreamed.

CHAPTER VII

DRUNKEN LOGIC

MEANWHILE, the affairs of the Freethought Association were taking a new and strange turn. John Blunt was, perhaps, Mr. Gifford's most trusted follower. Honesty was writ large on his broad face, and looked out, visible to all men, from his somewhat melancholy eyes. A lonely, much-meditating man—for he was a childless widower—if death had left his fireside vacant, and his creed had perished in the shipwreck of his affections, yet his nature remained unsoured. He was kindly, just-minded, and, above all things, practical. He was so humble-minded that Mr. Gifford's reading of the universe—its vastness, its mystery, its indifference to man—was accepted implicitly.

But there survived in John Blunt an Englishman's obstinate love of concrete results. That it bore apples was, he knew, the only logic which entitled an apple-tree to botanical respect. A creed, orthodox or unorthodox, must shape character, and shape it nobly, or it deserved nothing but scorn from God and man. Religion—even if it was labelled 'Freethought'—had necessarily the office of a medicine for a too visibly sick world; and a medicine which did not cure was a very poor fraud indeed.

'Can you make drunken Tom Oxley stop beating

his wife with your gospel of "no God" or of "an unknowable God"? ' David Christie had asked.

John Blunt had unpleasant reasons for anxiety on that score.

His niece was married to Tom Oxley, a good worker and a shrewd fellow, but who was rapidly becoming a hopeless drunkard, with all the evil possibilities to his own household with which the emergence of that vice is accompanied. In the gross drench of a drunkard's blood all honest affections are drowned; and John Blunt was sorely concerned about the future of his niece. Oxley, of late, had answered his anxious wife's too sharp-tongued remonstrances with hard blows, and John Blunt himself had seen her with eyes passing, from funereal black, through green and yellow, back to their native hue, as the result of her husband's disciplinary efforts. The poor wife's thin face, too, wore that look of darkening despair which, so soon, and so inevitably, creeps over the face of a drunkard's wife. The man's selfishness, the wife's sufferings, were becoming the scandal of Mill's Court, where the Oxley family resided.

Oxley had, of late, attended Mr. Gifford's theatre lectures, and his enthusiasm for the new gospel of liberty was loud-voiced. Would Mr. Gifford's teaching prove a regenerating force as far as Tom Oxley was concerned? Alas! so far, its only fruit had been a new and more reckless outburst of drunkenness.

John Blunt's countenance, as he reflected upon all this, took an air of resolve. Missionary work in behalf of any creed was a novelty to him. He sadly doubted whether he had the tact, the knowledge, the persuasiveness which go to the making of a successful missionary of any sort; for John Blunt was, as we

have said, a humble-minded man. But something ought to be done, and some one must do it. He would visit Mill's Court, remonstrate with Tom Oxley in the sacred and ennobling name of his new creed, and so try, in a practical fashion, the problem of whether it would 'cure a wife-beater.'

John Blunt was not given to introspection, and attempted no anxious analysis of the motives which fired the missionary impulse in his blood. It certainly was not any zeal for a divine Master, or even for a divine cause. Forces out of unknown worlds did not thrill John's spirit. He certainly did not share the faith which breathes in William Blake's 'Christian War-song.' If John Blunt had been asked :

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountain green ?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen ?

he would decidedly have said 'No.' Nor did John Blunt, for one, desire to see 'the holy Lamb of God' make His appearance in England's pleasant pastures. So John could not have taken William Blake's verse as his motto :

Bring me my bow of burning gold !
Bring me my arrows of desire !
Bring me my spear ; O clouds, unfold !
Bring me my chariot of fire !

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

And yet something of the passion of those lines—though without their justification—stirred in his blood.

He had no dream of any air-drawn 'Jerusalem' being planted on the soil of the modern world. But he wanted to see his new faith justify itself in the great field of human service. He longed to see it transfigure a slum ; partly, no doubt, because it would in this way equip itself with new and resistless credentials ; but partly, also, because he hungered to see some kind of social deliverance find its way into human life.

As he entered Oxley's house one evening, Oxley himself sat in the little dingy kitchen, hat on head, sulky and half stupid. It was Monday evening, and the avenging horrors of 'black Monday' were upon him. The wife was ironing some children's garments. Her brow was clouded. Her eyes sometimes burned and snapped with wrathful fire, and sometimes their glance ran furtively to and fro, shining with nervous apprehension. There was an angry emphasis, an Iliad of wrath and battle, in the very way in which she replaced the iron on its stand, while she turned over the little garment she was ironing. But fear was too plainly twin tenant with wrath in the poor wife's bewildered brain.

'You weren't at work to-day, Oxley,' said John Blunt, in what he meant to be a very ingratiating tone.

'That's nobody's business but my own,' replied Oxley bluntly.

John Blunt had as much 'diplomacy' as an absent-minded cow, and always translated into dialectics and morals the geometrical axiom that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points.

It's your wife's business too, isn't it?' he asked in sharply rising accents. 'If thou doesna work,' he went on, lapsing into dialect, 'there'll be little bread for her and the bairns.'

'If she doesn't complain,' answered Oxley defiantly, 'nobody else need. And who says,' he demanded, with rising voice, 'that my wife and bairns want bread?'

John Blunt, with anxious art, tried another line of advance.

'I am glad to see you at Mr. Gifford's lectures,' he said, thinking that here, at least, he would find a point of agreement with Oxley. 'Isn't listening to a grand lecture on science and Freethought better than drowning your soul in a beer-barrel?'

'Mr. Gifford says I have got no soul to drown,' replied Oxley, in sulky tones; 'so what does it matter? As to science and Freethought,' he went on, being in a quarrelsome mood, 'what use is it all? I could understand 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,' that mother taught me, and maybe He would have helped a chap who was down, and wanted helping. But Mr. Gifford says there is no Jesus, but only summat he calls Natur'. But Natur' will do nothing to help me up, and if I'm down it will keep me down. A glass of good beer gives more warmth to a poor man's stomach than all your "Natur."'

'But, Tom, a man is something else than a stomach, and a stomach to be filled with beer.'

'What else is he?' asked Oxley combatively.

John Blunt found it a little difficult, on the 'Free-thought' version of man, to explain, and while he hesitated Oxley went on in grumbling soliloquy:

'At all events, my stomach is a good bit of me, and is the only thing I'm sure about. Mr. Gifford doesn't believe in a soul, does he?' Oxley asked, in somewhat exasperated accents.

John Blunt felt it desirable to fall back on more

practical considerations. The new Creed had not yet made up its mind on the subject of 'souls.'

'Oxley,' he said, 'your drinking is killing you and will ruin your family. You used to be a decent fellow, and the trade respected you. You could speak fine at the Union, and they were going to put you on the committee.'

'Hang the committee!' interjected Oxley, a sentiment which, in John Blunt's ears—who had himself been for years a trusted leader amongst his fellow workmen—was nothing short of blasphemy.

'But, Oxley, man,' he went on, swallowing with a gulp his wrath, 'your drink is spoiling you. It's making you a broken man before your time.'

'Who says it's spoiling me? I'll swing the hammer with any fellow in the shop. And if I choose a short life and a merry one, why shouldn't I?'

'But a drunkard's life isn't a merry one.'

'I'm not a drunkard,' replied Oxley, in tones of wrath. 'A drop of drink is a poor man's only comfort.'

'Why don't you try to be like William Martin?' inquired Blunt. 'Everybody respects him. He is the best worker and the cheerfullest fellow in the shop, and sings all the day. He wants no beer to give him comfort.'

'Aye! Bill Martin's got something to sing about,' said Oxley, with a sudden drop in his voice. 'He's a good soul, and believes in his Bible and in heaven.'

'But that's a delusion, you know,' said John Blunt hastily. 'You've a better creed than his poor superstition.'

'Aye, it's a better one,' was Oxley's answer; 'but it sadly needs a little beer to make it comfortable.'

'Tom,' said John Blunt, wishing to secure the wife's help, 'I fear the publican gets more of your wages than

your wife does. You help to put silk on the back of the publican's wife, and let your own flesh and blood want decent clothing.'

'It's a lee,' cried Oxley, reverting to his native Lancashire patois in his anger.

'Don't come making trouble betwixt man and wife, uncle,' remonstrated Mrs. Oxley. 'That's an ill service. My Tom is just as good as other folks' husbands,' she added, with a wife's unreasoning jealousy for her 'man's' character—whatever that character may be.

John abandoned, with a groan, his missionary effort in the Oxley household, and Mrs. Oxley accompanied her disconsolate uncle to the door in peacemaking fashion.

'Oh, uncle,' she said, as he stood on the doorstep, 'if you hadn't taken him away from the little Methodist chapel it would have been better for all of us. He is twice as bad as he was now he goes to hear your Mr. Gifford proving that nothing's wrong and everybody is free to do just as he pleases. That's a doctrine that's ill for the wife and bairns.'

This version of his creed, added to his disgust at finding that even Mrs. Oxley made common cause with her husband against him, was too much for John Blunt. As he walked away he heard the voice of Tom Oxley from the kitchen, in accents of triumph:

'Right, lass, thou gav'st it him finely. Now send to the Blue Lion for another pint of beer.'

'Another pint of beer' to be poured into Tom Oxley's beer-drugged veins was certainly not the result John Blunt contemplated when he began his missionary labours in the Oxley household, and it was with very chastened feelings he retraced his way through Mill's Court.

John Blunt was, as we have said, a humble man;

and, as he walked in a mood of angry regret from Tom Oxley's door, he charged his own clumsiness, not the defects of his creed, with the blame of his failure. He had been put to rout as a missionary; yet he believed his cause was good, and his creed ought to have in it virile energy enough to make a drunkard sober and a wife-beater gentle. But he had handled his case clumsily. He would invoke the aid of Mr. Gifford himself. His better-instructed brain and more convincing logic, to say nothing of his finer tact, would, he hoped, succeed, in spite of Tom Oxley's disconcerting bluntness of speech. Mr. Gifford, he was sure, would not see with indifference the sacred cause of Freethought used as a salt to sharpen a drunkard's thirst.

Mr. Gifford, however, somewhat to John Blunt's surprise, showed no enthusiastic desire to interview Oxley. To deliver eloquent lectures to applauding crowds was delightful; but to undertake the moral reform of men in prosaic units was quite another thing. Why should Mr. Gifford abandon that serene realm in which his eloquence won such shining victories over air-drawn foes, and climb a dirty staircase in Mill's Court for the sake of expostulating with an imperfectly washed and half-drunken workman? Mr. Gifford, naturally, preferred the easy, rose-tinted abstract to the smoke-coloured and hard-angled concrete!

'I cannot do everything, John,' he said to his disappointed follower. 'I've got, no doubt,' he went on, soothingly, 'the defects of my qualities. I can talk to a crowd. I understand it, and am not afraid of it. But I've no small talk, and I don't like dealing with individuals. But bring the matter up at the committee meeting, and perhaps something may be done.'

John Blunt, accordingly, preferred, in the committee-room of the Freethought Association, his request that Mr. Gifford should visit Oxley, and undertake his reform. Mr. Creakles, the secretary, in a voice which resembled the music of a file gnawing a bit of steel, took strong objections to the proposal. It was illogical, he urged, for the representative of Freethought to spend time and energy in 'visiting'—as though he were nothing better than a city missionary—individual cases. The new theology knew nothing of units. Society was to be saved in the mass, not in units. Freethought, in fact, was quite indifferent to the human unit, and cared only for the human race. Wasn't that the principle on which the universe itself was conducted? The individual was nothing, the mass everything.

John Blunt tried to interject the remark that the race was only made up of units, but found nobody to listen to him.

Mr. Tinkler, a shoemaker of radical views in both politics and religion, contended that it was best that drunkards should be allowed to kill themselves off as expeditiously as possible. It was the law of nature that deteriorated types should perish. Why should they interfere with the august processes—so plainly benevolent—of nature, by trying to arrest the operations of a law so beneficent?

Mr. Tuggs, another member of the committee, argued that happiness was the proper end of life, and all forms of happiness were equally natural and equally justifiable. If Mr. Oxley found more enjoyment in what was called 'drunkenness' than in 'sobriety,' it was within his natural right to give effect to his choice. Human liberty was sacred. It was not the business of Freethought, at all events, to interfere with it.

'No man has the right,' growled the always practical and now exasperated John Blunt, 'to kill himself with drink, and leave his wife and children to be taken care of by others. It is everybody's business,' he added, in rising tones, 'to try to stop a man from committing suicide. We must show that our creed can arrest vice, not merely as well as an effete Christianity, but a great deal better.'

'I thought we agreed,' said Mr. Creakles, with an air of philosophical remonstrance, 'that "vice" was an exploded word, and should not be used to describe the gratification of appetites which are natural; and being natural, are legitimate.'

'Well, you may call drunkenness a virtue, if you like,' said John Blunt; 'but your new terminology will ruin you. Plain sense is not to be tricked in that fashion. Drunkenness is a deadly curse; and if you don't kill it, it will kill society. Here is an opportunity,' he went on, with growing emphasis, 'of proving that our creed, as a social force, is a better thing than Christianity. Freethought must produce not only fine lectures, but improved lives. Don't we hold our funds in trust for the purpose of making practical applications of Freethought to social questions? We've done nothing but give Sunday-night lectures, so far. They're first-rate,' John said, apologetically, to Mr. Gifford, 'but they're not practical. Oxley is the type of a class, and we ought to prove that our principles, applied to that class, work well. Tom Oxley attends Mr. Gifford's lectures, and Mr. Gifford might well try if he can't save a man who believes his teaching from becoming a drunken suicide.'

Mr. Gifford was always moved by an appeal to his chivalry.

‘I will go, John,’ he said. ‘That the exploded superstitions of Christianity are more tender in sympathy, or more fruitful in service, than the scientific and nobler faith we teach, is not to be imagined.’

‘But the society,’ remonstrated Mr. Creakles, in his most metallic tones, ‘must not be held responsible for your act. You are establishing an inconvenient, and even a dangerous, precedent.’

‘It’s better to try and fail,’ said John Blunt emphatically, ‘than not to try at all.’

CHAPTER VIII

A DEFEAT

WHEN Mr. Gifford set out on his visit to Mill Court the next day, he met Mr. Looker on the way. Now, Mr. Looker was accustomed to boast he had 'no prejudices.' He was free of both theological camps. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that his keen tongue and trick of unsparing criticism were equally dreaded in both. He had, somehow, the gift of knowing everything that was going on. He was interested, he cheerfully confessed, in humanity, and all human affairs were his concern. So all the gossip of the town flowed into his ears. He knew as much about the recent debate in the Freethought Association as if he had assisted at it in person; and his many-lined, Socrates-looking face lit up with a dry smile as he met Mr. Gifford.

That gentleman had an uncomfortable consciousness that Mr. Looker knew his exact errand, and discovered humour in it.

'Well, Mr. Gifford! So you are going to beat the Bible-women at their own trade?' said Mr. Looker. 'Only a Bible-woman minus a Bible represents a somewhat novel experiment, doesn't it?'

'I have no intention,' said Mr. Gifford, with an uncomfortable smile, 'of displacing the Bible-woman, and

I am not setting up as a city missionary, either with a Bible or without one. But if I can save one who looks to me as a teacher from becoming a drunkard, I think I ought to try to do it. Am I unfortunate enough not to have your approval, Mr. Looker ?'

'Oh, I'm delighted ; only, Mr. Gifford—though you don't suspect it—you are going to commit theological suicide !'

'I hope,' said Mr. Gifford, with a smile, 'that I am not on the verge of anything so alarming.'

'Well, you are taking Freethought out of the easy and pleasant realm of rhetoric into the kingdom of facts. You are going to spin a cobweb across the path of a locomotive. That will be bad for the cobweb !'

'But I don't grant your "cobweb," Mr. Looker. My teaching, as I see it, reflects the eternal and unchangeable facts of the universe ; and they are something more than the filaments of a cobweb.'

'Your teaching, whatever it reflects, has not moral energy enough to conquer a vice. No ! It will make vice easy. And you are on the way to prove that in your visit to Tom Oxley !'

'Is it quite polite, Mr. Looker, to say that Free-thought will make vice easy ?'

'I have not considered that,' replied Mr. Looker, with a twinkle of humour in his eye ; 'I thought you put truth before politeness. But what can you say that will cool Tom Oxley's thirst for beer ?'

'I can say everything that ought to move the self-respect of an intelligent man. I can say all that your Bible-woman can say, and can say it on loftier grounds than she can.'

'Yes, you can steal the ethics of Christianity. But there is one thing you cannot steal !'

‘And what is that?’

‘Its motives! Its spiritual energy!’

‘Well, truth has its own energy.’

‘The discovery you are about to make, Mr. Gifford, when you interview Tom Oxley, is that truth has no saving energy in itself. Christianity is a scheme of ethics plus a supernatural force. It is a locomotive plus steam. Now, your Freethought is a locomotive minus steam.’

‘I am glad you concede it is a locomotive,’ replied Mr. Gifford, ‘and I think you will find there is steam enough to drive it.’

‘Well, a locomotive without steam is so much old iron. Nay! it’s worse. It’s a fraud. It’s a mechanical hypocrisy. It undertakes to drag a train, and it can’t even make its own wheels turn round.

‘Tom Oxley’s case will enlighten you on that point,’ continued Mr. Looker, with an air of pleasant certainty that curiously disquieted Mr. Gifford. ‘But I will mend my illustration,’ he went on. ‘The difference betwixt Freethought—your version of Freethought, Mr. Gifford, which is about the best extant—and Christianity, is the difference betwixt a time-table and a railway. You have stolen the time-table of Christianity. You have no right to it, you know! You undertake to reach the same moral ends as Christianity. But how are you to get there? Shall a man get to London by sitting down on a Bradshaw’s Guide? Committing oneself to the Christian scheme is like getting into an express train. It carries you! It is a going concern! But Freethought—— Mr. Gifford, you have stolen the time-table, but you can’t invent the train!’

‘You have a pretty gift for metaphors, Mr. Looker; but, then, metaphors don’t count.’

'Ah, well! Tom Oxley is going to educate you. You are on the road to the discovery that my metaphors reflect eternal facts better than your teaching does! You won't allow me to accompany you, Mr. Gifford, will you?'

'No, Mr. Looker,' was the reply. 'I am afraid your atmosphere is unfriendly to my experiment'; and, with a somewhat uneasy laugh, Mr. Gifford went on his way. Mr. Looker was decidedly discouraging.

Mrs. Oxley stared with surprise when the tall form and refined face of Mr. Gifford appeared before her, as she opened the door in response to a knock.

'Is your husband in?' asked the apostle of Free-thought—and, it may be added, with an unconfessed hope that he might be out.

With visible reluctance Mrs. Oxley admitted he was; but, she added, he was not fit to see such a visitor as Mr. Gifford. Here a gruff voice from the back room at the end of the passage bade her 'bring the Freethought parson in,' and then Oxley, in person, and in a mood of spirituous exaltation, offered himself to the somewhat embarrassed gaze of Mr. Gifford.

'I am glad to see you at my lectures sometimes,' said Mr. Gifford, in a pleasant fashion.

'Yes,' admitted Tom Oxley, 'I like to hear you talk; and, man, you do give it to the parsons,' he added admiringly. 'It gives a chap a deal of comfort to hear you gassing.'

Mr. Gifford, with wise diplomacy, ignored the description of his lectures as 'gassing.'

'Comfort,' he said, 'isn't exactly what I try to give. That is spoon food for invalids. But what is the particular aspect of my lectures which gives you such comfort?'

'You see,' said Tom, in beery and confidential tones, with a flavour of dialect, 'some of they old-warl' stories stick to a fellow in spite of himself, and so a man can't get "tight" in pcease. There's a text in the old Bible which runs in my brain whiles, "no drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of heaven," and that gives me a creepy feeling like. It spoils a man's beer,' he said, with a note of disgusted indignation in his voice. 'But you make it all fine and clear. There is no kingdom of heaven at all; so it's no loss to be kept out of it. So,' he added, with a grin, 'I get drunk twice as comfortably and twice as often as I did before.'

Now, this was decidedly an unexpected, not to say vulgar and disappointing, application of his teaching, and it discomposed Mr. Gifford not a little.

'Mr. Oxley,' he said, with a touch of sternness, 'if my teaching makes drunkenness easy, and drunkards "comfortable," then it is evil teaching, and as false as it is evil; and I detest and renounce it. But you quite misunderstand what I say. The new light of science lifts you out of superstition, and calls you to a nobler manhood than before, not to a baser manhood.'

'Calls me to what?' asked Oxley, with an air of non-comprehension.

'To a nobler manhood.'

'And what's that?'

'To the conquest of your appetites, and to a life spent for others.'

'But why should I quarrel with my appetites?' asked Oxley. 'You said that everything that was natural was right; and eh, man! it's awfu' natural to want a second glass of beer when you've drunk the first.'

‘You must learn to live for humanity, not for yourself; and least of all for your baser self.’

‘But I’m a bit of humanity,’ argued Tom Oxley; ‘the nearest bit, too,’ he went on, with a cunning look in his eyes; ‘and the biggest bit—the bit I’m most interested in, at all events. Why shouldn’t I please my own bit of humanity? And what will it all matter,’ he added, in a lower tone, as if to himself, ‘fifty years to come? It’s all very well for you,’ he went on, with a kindling sense of injury, ‘to say I ought to be ashamed of myself for drinking all the beer I can get. You’ve got books, and money, and your lectures; and if you got drunk you’d have none of them. But, I tell you, Mr. Gifford, beer is books, and money, and lectures, and all to me; and why should I give it up? As for “humanity,” yon’s a big word. What does it mean? Does it mean the boss at the workshop? Why should I live for him? He can do without me. Does it mean the landlord at the Blue Lion? Why, he’d starve if we all turned sober.’

‘Well,’ said Mr. Gifford, with an attempt to translate the vague term ‘humanity’ into the more attractive concrete, ‘it means your wife and children.’

‘Ah, poor things,’ said Oxley, in half a whisper. ‘But,’ he broke out, ‘dinna you meddle with them. Jack’s old enough to take care of himself; and as for little Jess, she’s in heaven. At least, no,’ he added, ‘you say there is no heaven. I used to think my little Jess would be shamed, like, among the angels, if they knew she had a drunken father; and this used to check me whiles. But since I found out from your lectures that there is no heaven, and Jess is nowhere, why,’ he asked, with sudden fierceness, ‘why shouldn’t I drink? What else is left a man?’

'If there's no heaven,' said Mr. Gifford, 'your manhood is left, and every glass of beer you drink enervates your will. It lowers you. It kills something good in you. It is a seed of future pain.'

'But death winds all up,' argued Oxley. 'It will be no worse for me under the coffin lid than for David Christie, who never had a real good time all his life. Now if I believed I had a soul, and it would have to pay for all the sins of my body, I'd tak' a thought and mend. But you don't believe that, Mr. Gifford? Aye, or if I thought little Jess was waiting for me somewhere ayont the grave, and that, maybe, if I died a drunkard, I'd never see her, then I'd stop. But there's no more little Jess—no more little Jess,' he repeated, with a groan.

'Suppose all the race were to do as you do,' remonstrated Mr. Gifford; 'why, humanity would be destroyed.'

'What do I care for humanity?' said Oxley coolly. 'You told us that science proves the globe will be turned into a ball of ice; then parsons and Freethought lecturers, and drunkards, and publicans will all end together. What will be the difference betwixt them then? Better to die drunk,' he went on, with a laugh, 'than to die frozen. I tell you, getting "tight" was always grand, but you didn't know whether it mightn't cost you too much in the long-run. But when you proved there was no right or wrong in the business, and no heaven or hell at the end of it, why, you just made a good "burst," for those who like it, the most sensible thing in the world.'

Mr. Gifford walked away from Tom Oxley's door in a mood of sorest disgust. A religious reformer, it was clear, ran strange risks. To see his lofty theories,

the highest effort of thought and speech of which he was capable, translated into such drab-coloured and unlovely concrete! What malign logic was this which extracted an argument for drunkenness from the most eloquent of his lectures? It was an idiot's trick! In the alembic of a drunken fool's brain, any evil transfiguration was possible.

A new discomfiture awaited Mr. Gifford. A few steps from the door he found himself face to face with Mrs. Baxter, the Bible-woman, who was plainly on her way to the Oxleys. The little worn-faced Bible-woman, with her black shawl and dowdy bonnet, looked up at the tall figure of Mr. Gifford, and there was a gaze in her honest grey eyes, half-pitying, half-stern, which that gentleman found a little trying.

'Eh, sir,' she cried, 'and are *you* visiting the slums? Do you want to rob sinful men and despairing women under these miserable roofs of their Saviour?'

'No, Mrs. Baxter,' said Mr. Gifford, with a smile, 'I don't contemplate any theft so vast. But truth is better and safer than any myth. I don't rob any one by giving them truth instead of a dream.'

'But, Mr. Gifford, if Jesus Christ is an invention, who invented Him? I hear ye quote Shakespeare a great deal, and say he is the most inspired man the world ever knew. And wouldn't an ordinary man—a poor fool himself—who could invent Shakespeare be more wonderful than Shakespeare himself? And who,' she insisted, 'invented Christ? Could a bad man have invented Him? Why, he *couldn't* have imagined Him! And a good man *wouldn't* have invented Him. Fact or invention, Jesus Christ is here, and how do you explain Him?'

'I don't feel called upon to "explain" Him, Mrs.

Baxter,' said Mr. Gifford, who found theological discourse with a shabbily dressed Bible-woman in the open street rather trying.

'But,' said Mrs. Baxter, with a gentler note in her voice, 'if Christianity is a lie, isn't it a beautiful lie? Don't you wish it were true? Wouldn't it be grand if it were true? if a heart as tender as your mother's were behind the stars, and was seeking me and you and all men? and if beyond this weary world, with all its tears, there was a heaven, where mothers and their dead children met, and tired folk had endless rest, and there was no pain nor trouble? Mr. Gifford,' asked the little Bible-woman, with eager insistence, 'if you were God, wouldn't you make such a heaven? I am sure you would! And don't you think God is as good as you?'

'I can't undertake to weigh so wild an imagination,' said Mr. Gifford.

'But do you think,' urged Mrs. Baxter, 'that men can imagine anything bigger and better than God can do? Ah, Mr. Gifford, your mistake is that you think God is a little being; a poorer thing than you are yourself. That is why Christianity seems incredible.'

And with a smile that lit up her thin and lined face as with a flash of sunlight, the little woman hurried on her errand of pity.

Mr. Gifford was one of those orators who find an opiate in their own eloquence. His platform rhetoric was, to him, what a narcotic is to a drug-eater. His next Sunday-night's lecture restored his intellectual self-respect; which, to tell the truth, had been sorely shaken by Tom Oxley's rough logic. He delivered an impassioned oration on 'The Ethical Failure of

Christianity,' and 'The Superiority of Marcus Aurelius to St. Paul.' It was unanimously declared to be Mr. Gifford's very finest effort.

Tom Oxley listened to it with a grin, and adjourned, at its close, to the Blue Lion, with a new thirst. John Blunt listened to it with a sigh, and walked home painfully exercised by the problem of why Tom Oxley was a worse drunkard after Mr. Gifford's visit than he had ever been before.

CHAPTER IX

MYRTLE

CECIL lost one of the great steadying forces of his life when the tie—vague and tentative, yet sweet—which bound him to Kate Arden was snapped. A love for a pure girl is a force which makes for purity in the lover himself. His rejection, moreover—and the reason behind it—stung Cecil's vanity. It kindled an angry resentment; an evil flame which burned up much that was good in him. His home life, too, fretted him. His mother more than half worshipped him. But it was with an exacting, worrying affection that sorely fretted the nerves of its object. Love itself, when flavoured with the spirit of jealous exaction, may discharge the office of a blister.

A few mornings after the scene with Kate, Cecil sat at the breakfast-table with a sullen brow and nerves all shaken and irritable. His father, who never understood his son, and was never at ease with him, sat at the head of the table, reading his newspaper, while he ate—for it was a household of unsocial habits. When the meal was half through, Mrs. Sparks made her appearance.

'Dear, dear,' she cried, 'how close the room is! How it smells of the breakfast!' and she proceeded

with much clatter to open the windows. Had they been open, she would, with equal clatter, have hastened to shut them. Mrs. Sparks, by bent of nature, was always dissatisfied with things as they were. When she reached heaven, her son used to say banteringly, she would immediately find fault with the ventilation, and want to introduce a few improvements in the wings of the angels!

When at last Mrs. Sparks had succeeded in making everybody uncomfortable with her alterations in the room, she sat down at her end of the table, but instantly got up again.

‘Cecil! you are not well. Your face is flushed. Whatever is the matter? I think you must be feverish. Is your throat sore? I must give you some medicine. Mary, fetch down my homoeopathic chest.’

Now, if there is one thing which the healthy young male abhors, it is to have medicines administered to him, especially by an amateur. But to administer medicines was his mother’s favourite occupation. She proceeded to demand from Cecil an exposition of all his feelings. She insisted on his possession of a given set of symptoms; proceeded to mix the required dose, and spoon in hand, pour it down Cecil’s throat.

Cecil usually submitted to this operation with grim patience; but he was now in a nervous and sulky mood, which made patience a difficult virtue, and he swore softly under his breath as his mother, having begun to doubt if she had put the required number of drops of the tincture into the glass, wished to go over the process again.

‘Cecil,’ said his father bluntly, ‘don’t be a cad!

Have your new friends robbed you of your manners as well as of your religion ?'

'Perhaps all the religion I had,' said Cecil, 'was a mere affair of manners—like that of some other people.'

The father, a man of violent temper, felt as if the nearest ecclesiastical equivalent to an oath was the only appropriate answer.

Mrs. Sparks here broke in with a new agitation.

'Cecil, what time did you come in last night? Did you put the light out in the hall? Where were you? Who was with you? What were you doing?'

Cecil was accustomed to cross-examination of this sort, and an adept in evading it; but this morning he was too sulky to endure the rack, or to take the trouble to evade it.

'Why do you make me a criminal, mother, and put me in the dock in this fashion? Must I give an account of every hour of my time, and a list of the people with whom I talked? Why can't you let a fellow alone, and let him have a little freedom.'

'Oh, Cecil,' cried his mother, 'I am only anxious for your good.'

'If you were a little less anxious, mother, it would be happier for both of us.'

'But your liberty,' said his father, 'is very apt to grow into licence. This is a decent home, and I won't have my son disgracing me by creeping into it after midnight.'

'If I disgrace the home, sir,' said Cecil, 'there's one easy remedy: I can leave it.'

'Oh, Cecil,' cried the mother; 'oh, Cecil, you'll bring on my attacks again.'

Mrs. Sparks had a nervous headache which was producible at pleasure. It was referred familiarly to as 'my attacks,' and was commonly employed when other arguments failed to bring her husband into subjection, or to silence Cecil's too bitter tongue. Cecil cast one glance at his father's sulky face, and another at his mother's Niobe-like attitude; then, with an execration which he did not take the trouble to soften, walked out of the room.

'I want a little sunshine of some sort,' he said to himself bitterly, as he drew the door sharply to behind him. There certainly was not much 'sunshine' in Cecil's home. His father was an embodied thunder-cloud; his mother a perpetual agitation.

Discontented with himself, and with his whole environment, Cecil flung himself yet more defiantly into alliance with the Freethought Association. He became its advocate, and found a pleasure in showing the freedom from ancient 'superstitions' and conventions which his new creed gave him. He discussed new and daring experiments in conduct. Mr. Gifford himself found a pleasure in the society of this young, audacious spirit. Cecil was better educated and of easier social habits than most of the followers Mr. Gifford drew round him, and he translated Mr. Gifford's speculations into conduct with a feverish energy which delighted, if it sometimes alarmed, his teacher.

One evening he took Cecil home with him.

'My house,' he said, 'has a gay visitor, for which it is too dull a cage. Come with me, and lighten a little of its dullness.'

As they entered the drawing-room a girl sat playing the piano. She rose as the two stood before her, and as the bright light fell upon her brow and

hair she almost took Cecil's breath away, with a vision of keen, dark, intense beauty.

'Myrtle,' said Mr. Gifford, 'this is Cecil Sparks. This is my sister, Mr. Sparks, who has come for a while to stay with us.'

Myrtle glanced at Cecil as he bowed to her. This, then, was the lover which that fair-browed Puritan, Kate Arden, had kept in suspense so long, and had at last rejected. Myrtle's eyes dwelt on him with curiosity. 'Kate Arden,' she thought to herself, 'never had any taste, and she was a simpleton to let such a lover slip.'

As they sat and chatted, Cecil's soft voice and quick wit deepened the impression which his vivid features had made; while Cecil allowed his somewhat bold eyes, with ever-growing content, to wander over the face and figure of the girl before him. She lacked, he felt by instinct, the serene intelligence, the depth of feeling, the quick humour, the unshakable principle of Kate Arden. But he was in a mood which rather resented the saintly element in a woman's character.

Certainly there was nothing of a too icy saintliness in Myrtle. She had the perilous gift of beauty in a much more alluring form than that of Kate. She might have sat to a sculptor as a model of Hebe; and yet the cool purity of marble was sufficiently remote from Myrtle's warm, rich-tinted grace. Her dark eyes, with a hint of slumbering passion in them, intoxicated like wine. Her full red lips and black—almost blue-black—shining hair gave Oriental richness to her face. There was a soft and careless ease about her which the careless observer found charming; but which to keener judgement marked a subtle want of self-protecting purity.

Myrtle was, in fact, of a very epicurean temperament. She loved soft things, and bright colours, and rich scents, and easy, compliant ways. She had passed through her school course with Kate Arden, and then became a teacher; but she lacked the grit and strength necessary for that somewhat trying office, and so had come to live for a while with her brother, who was much older than Myrtle, and had always exercised a sort of fatherly guardianship over her.

Myrtle accepted her brother's creed with cheerful facility. She probably did not in the least understand either the new doctrines she accepted, or the old ones she cast overboard; but at least the change meant the blotting out of existence of a whole world of inconvenient restrictions. Any form of theology, indeed, in shabby clothes and under a social ban, would have repelled Myrtle. But Freethought as she found it flourishing at Middleford—over-crowding the churches, followed by crowds, served with eloquence, and fed fat with luxury—delighted her. She promised herself 'a good time'; and Cecil, as she looked at him, seemed to be excellently qualified to assist her in the discovery of 'a good time.'

The chat presently wandered in the direction of Kate. Cecil's brow darkened as her name was mentioned, and Myrtle, who knew his story, noted the sudden look of gloom with amusement.

'I knew Kate well at school,' she said. 'She will never marry anybody but a parson. She always put theology first, and was weighing doctrines when we other girls were comparing blouses. Nature intended her to be an eternal Sunday-school teacher. She has no more warmth about her than an iceberg.'

Cecil knew all this to be unjust, and was almost

startled at the boldness with which his new acquaintance talked. He felt, with a sure instinct, that there was a higher capacity for unselfish love—the love of wife and of mother—behind Kate's clear eyes and calm brow than even in Myrtle's warm-blooded figure. And yet it soothed him to hear a girl whose unattainable and star-like grace mocked his desires thus described. He had felt awkward when the talk wandered in Kate's direction; but now his awkwardness softened into gratitude. The glance of Myrtle's dark eyes, too, ran through his blood like fire.

'Miss Arden,' he said, 'is a feminine icicle, an icicle in petticoats. My taste runs to warmer qualities,' and under his daring and expressive glance Myrtle's cheeks took a deeper colour.

Mr. Gifford had been called away by some engagement, and the pair chatted and laughed together to a late hour. Myrtle walked with Cecil to the gate of the little garden, and he pressed her hand, at parting, with a freedom he had never dared to attempt with Kate.

'A dainty bit,' he said to himself, as he walked away. 'No theology here. No dread of Mrs. Grundy.'

Her rich beauty would make a sensation in Middleford; and to walk by her side, and enjoy a monopoly of smiles, would soothe the vanity which Kate's rejection had left sore.

The meeting of Cecil, in his present mood, with Myrtle, was like the meeting of fire and tow. Mr. Gifford was philosophically unconscious that Cecil was an almost nightly visitor at his house, and that Myrtle's cheeks flushed at his coming; while Mrs. Gifford's attention was absorbed with her little

daughter Mary, who was drooping like a rootless flower.

Mr. Gifford, as a matter of fact, was half fascinated and half frightened with his young disciple. Cecil often sat with him far into the night, and discussed the forms a new society, with morals purged of 'superstition,' and framed on a non-Christian pattern, would take; and Mr. Gifford found that Cecil had an audacity of imagination, unfettered by conventions, which startled him. Society, he contended, must be remodelled. Virtue had hitherto worn too austere a brow. Enjoyment, in the new ethics, rose to the dignity and scale of a duty. The relation betwixt the sexes must be made freer.

Man, argued Cecil, is cast, without choice of his own, by a Force of which he knows nothing, for an end which he cannot guess, into a world he can never understand, and which, as a matter of fact, is unconscious of his existence, or indifferent to it. With all this Mr. Gifford agreed; it was his own rhetorical thunder, vibrating in many a lecture. But Cecil went on to demand: 'In this gap, this brief interval betwixt two mysteries, which we call life, what is man's most urgent business?' And he answered his own question according to his own temperament. It is to enjoy!

Cecil grew eloquent on the wasted opportunities of enjoyment with which—like fallen blossoms, to which no fruit had ever come—every path trodden by human feet was strewn. Nine human lives out of every ten were mere unfulfilled prophecies; songs unsung; arrested buds that never broke into blossom. His philosophy was of the *carpe diem* order. Man was only sure of to-day. To-morrow was doubtful; next

year yet more doubtful; the next century irrelevant. Why not crowd every possible pleasure into every passing moment? The epicurean creed was the only belief for sane men; epicurean ethics supplied the only rule by which a healthy life ought to shape itself!

CHAPTER X

SLIPPERY PLACES

MR. GIFFORD, as we have said, began to find the logic of his young disciple almost too audacious for him. He had an uneasy and unconfessed sense, indeed, that such deductions from his teaching as Cecil was triumphantly drawing would, in the long-run, discredit it. They might be logical, but they were inconvenient. They ought to be esoteric. The world was not ready for them.

But Cecil, with his more eager temperament and hotter blood, felt that his teacher was, at this point, absurdly timid. His logic halted. He laid down premisses, but shrank from their inevitable conclusion. He planted the seed, but was afraid to look at the flower. The one practical problem about which a sensible man need concern himself was how to secure the widest range of enjoyment in the narrowest limits of time.

Money was, of course, the tool and servant of all enjoyment; the open sesame at whose whisper every cabinet of delight would fly open. But money was scanty. Cecil scorned the inadequate salary he earned at the bank. He handled so much money, but got so little! His fingers lingered over the silver and gold

coins that filled his safe. They were frozen forces, undeveloped possibilities of enjoyment. They could be translated into a thousand delights. Why were they not his?

At least their use might be his. How to extract some service from them—not dishonestly, though ‘honesty’ and ‘dishonesty’ belonged to the outworn terminology of the Bible—but safely? This was the problem to which Cecil bent his quick and restless imagination.

Presently one ingenious device shaped itself in his busy and scheming brain. The Building Society of which Mr. Creakles was secretary and manager had clothed itself illegitimately with some of the functions of a bank. It offered a tempting rate of interest for ‘deposits at call’; and offered it in vain to a somewhat incredulous public. But in the bank’s safe was a standing reserve of nearly £50,000 in actual cash, a provision—with a generous margin—for the daily demands of the counter. A considerable portion of it lay, month by month, idle and unused.

One department of the strong room held this large sum of bullion. On the upper shelves were rows of canvas bags, each one holding 500 sovereigns; the middle shelves held bags of silver, the lower ones copper; each variety of precious metal being packed in bags of a different colour.

Cecil gazed at these lines of canvas bags, and each one seemed, to his imagination, like Aladdin’s lamp, in the Arabian fable, translated into modern terms. It held a genius! He noted how seldom the back line of the yellow bags which held the gold was moved. Even the inspector only counted their number, and seldom opened them to check their contents. Cecil

had possession of one of the two keys which opened the cash safe. His manager Mr. Arden had the reputation of being a keen and able officer, and, in his time, he had rendered the bank distinguished service. But he was growing old. His wife was dead. To soothe his shaken nerves, he had formed the 'opium habit'; and he had found in Mr. Gifford's teachings another opiate for more than the senses. He had grown dreamy, indolent, neglectful—though with intermittent flashes of his ancient keenness. He had come to lean on his quicker subordinate, and so Cecil enjoyed a somewhat perilous degree of freedom.

One morning Cecil came to the bank a little early, and sent up to Mr. Arden—who was not yet down—for the keys of the strong room. He opened the door of the cash safe with his own key, took out two of the yellow bags of gold from the back row, substituting, for them, two bags of the same colour, but filled with copper. The two pairs of bags exactly resembled each other in colour and bulk.

Later in the day he made his appearance in Mr. Creakles's office, and lodged £1,000 in gold in his own name, at call. This gave him an additional £40 a year, and the transaction, he argued, was safe, and even justifiable. For the bank ran no risk. He was only, Cecil said to himself, increasing, and without cost to his employers, his quite inadequate salary.

Mr. Creakles's foxy eyebrows went up with surprise when the deposit was made. How could Cecil Sparks, the parson's son, with the limited salary of a bank teller, become the possessor of £1,000 in gold coin? One day the £1,000 was suddenly called in by Cecil, and, after a few days, replaced; and Mr. Creakles noted that the calling in of the money coincided with

the visit of the bank inspector. Three months later the same events took place in the same order.

When next Cecil presented himself at Mr. Creakles's office, and, producing his deposit receipt, asked for the £1,000, Mr. Creakles said, drily, he 'had not the cash.' Cecil grew first pale with fear, then, as he noted the somewhat insolent unconcern of Mr. Creakles, he grew red with anger. He stormed furiously at the little fox-visaged secretary, with his shifty eyes. He would burst up the Building Society, he swore.

'No, you won't,' said Mr. Creakles.

'Why not?' angrily demanded Cecil.

'Because you will only burst up yourself if you do.'

'Myself,' stammered Cecil.

'Yes! Where does that £1,000 come from? Won't your bank-safe tell?'

Cecil stood speechless and gasping.

'Come, come,' said Mr. Creakles, 'we need each other. We ought to work together. Mr. Arden is in the swim, or ought to be. Let him give me a bigger overdraft, and I will give you a cheque.'

'But,' said Cecil, after a bitter pause, during which he was perilously near taking Mr. Creakles by the throat, and strangling him summarily, 'we must have security for any extension of the overdraft, or the advance itself will be challenged by the inspector.'

'Well,' replied Mr. Creakles, 'you have all the scrip and stock of the Association lodged with you for safe keeping. I will sign a lien upon it, and that will give us all time.'

Cecil noted the 'us,' and winced at the alliance it represented.

'But you have no authority to give a lien,' he remonstrated.

'You get Mr. Arden to take my authority, or else there will be trouble,' and, with that, Mr. Creakles turned bluntly round and walked into his front office, leaving Cecil in a state of mingled despair and fury.

As he walked back to the bank the solid earth seemed slipping from under his feet. At the bank another shock of a yet more alarming character awaited him. Mr. Arden had occasion to go to the cash safe, and something—some look of newness or strangeness—in the substituted bags drew his eye. His senses were in one of their rare and curious moods of preternatural keenness, and a touch of his fingers told him the bags held pence, and not sovereigns.

The surprise of the discovery shook him terribly; but after a moment's pause the cool and alert instinct of the banker awoke in him. He closed the safe, and walked back into his private office. A touch on the electric bell brought Cecil in.

'Mr. Sparks,' said the manager, watching Cecil's face with keen and remorseless scrutiny, 'two bags of gold have been taken from the cash safe, holding 1,000 sovereigns, and two bags of copper have been put in their place. A thousand sovereigns, in a word, have gone; and they have gone into your pocket or mine, for only you and I have the keys. The gold is certainly not in my pocket. What have you done with it?'

Cecil's face, gone suddenly grey with terror, was an ample confession. As Mr. Arden, however, grimly watched him, Cecil pulled himself together a bit, and said,

'I have borrowed it.'

'Borrowed it!' said Mr. Arden, with quiet and intense scorn.

'There is the deposit receipt,' said Cecil. 'It is in Mr. Creakles's Building Society, and it is safe. The bank has lost nothing. All I have gained is the interest.'

The two looked steadily at each other. All the manager was alert in Mr. Arden; but into Cecil's eyes had stolen a look of challenge, not to say menace, which strangely disquieted Mr. Arden.

'That's a rogue's trick,' he replied, at last. 'There is the jail-cell at the end of it. I must send for the police.'

'Mr. Arden,' said Cecil, with strange coolness, 'what about your private cheques, where cash ought to be? Are your cheques any better security than Mr. Creakles's deposit receipt? If I go, you go too.'

Mr. Arden's face, in turn, was by this time grey with fear. He had used the bank cash, putting in his personal cheque as an acknowledgement. It was 'irregular'; an offence against all banking ethics. The law might call it, indeed, by a harsher name. His directors certainly would. It would, if known, be his professional ruin.

'But the bank would never lose by me,' he said weakly.

'Nor by me.'

Each looked at the other with questioning eyes. In that brief pause the film of use and wont was dissolving. The whole fabric of professional honour was crumbling to dust. The relation of the two men was changed. They were no longer accuser and accused; they were fellow criminals. And the younger and more daring spirit prevailed.

'Mr. Arden,' said Cecil, 'your cheques are irregular; but they are a harmless and profitable irregularity.'

That is just what my deposit receipt is. Let us stand by one another. We know the bank won't lose by us.'

Mr. Arden's opium-corroded nerves were by this time breaking down. His hands were trembling, as though palsy-stricken; his lips were twitching.

But the inspector comes this week,' he whispered feebly. 'It will be ruin if the gold is not there.'

Cecil by this time felt his power.

'It is all right, Mr. Arden. I will put it back in twenty-four hours, but you must give Mr. Creakles a new overdraft for the £1,000.'

'I can't without security,' said Mr. Arden.

'Well, he'll give a lien on the Freethought scrip and stock. I don't know if he has authority to do it,' said Cecil, 'but we must take that risk.'

Mr. Creakles, to Cecil's fury, insisted on the new overdraft being £1,500, and of this Cecil was to receive only the £1,000. But time was short—too short for delay or contest—and Mr. Creakles had his way.

From that moment Mr. Arden was at the mercy of his junior. He had condoned a crime. He was an accomplice. A still larger amount of gold went out 'on deposit' to Mr. Creakles, and for this Cecil drew the interest. Mr. Arden's cheques for still larger amounts became the paper symbols for cash illegitimately used by the manager himself.

Mr. Creakles was the most triumphant member of the group. He grinned with delight as he realized his position. He held the bank in his hand, like an orange, to be squeezed. Manager and teller alike were his tools. His bank overdraft should expand to dimensions of which the unhappy Mr. Arden, at

present, little dreamed. Mr. Gifford would have been startled if he had known in what financial transactions the secretary of the F.A. and his own best-beloved disciple were engaged.

Cecil had a disquieted sense that he was in Mr. Creakles's power; but, on the other hand, was not Mr. Creakles in his power, too? His *carpe diem* philosophy stood by him, but a new note of recklessness stole into it. His time might be short; he would enjoy, no matter who suffered. He visited Mr. Gifford's house that night, and found Myrtle alone, and persuaded her to put on her hat and jacket, and come for a walk with him in the summer night by the river. The sighing, lamenting stream chanted its warning in vain to the passion-filled pair.

CHAPTER XI

A THEOLOGICAL ROUND-TABLE

MEANWHILE, the question whether logic is a sufficient solvent for unbelief was being tried under new conditions and before a new jury. Professor Gardner had summoned his round-table conference betwixt the representatives of the old faith and of the new. The result was an odd gathering for an odd purpose.

In the Freethought camp the proposal to hold a round-table conference, a friendly and quiet chat, in Professor Gardner's study, was at first regarded with much suspicion. What was to be gained by it? In such a gathering, debate would lack all its usual inspiring conditions. There would be no crowd to cheer, and, as Mr. Creakles, in particular, complained, no collection to follow.

Mr. Gifford, however, though he refused to take part in public debate, was too chivalrous to decline Professor Gardner's invitation. He insisted on the proposal being accepted.

'The representatives of a new and nobler creed,' he said, 'must not be outdone in either courage or courtesy by the spokesmen of a dying faith.'

Not a few of the committee had openly acknowledged doubts as to Mr. Gifford's capacity to hold his own in the rough-and-tumble of a public debate. He had

shown an unexpected and disconcerting contempt for some of the best jests by which Mr. Stumps had roused ecstasies of laughter against the Bible. In a round-table conference he might do better; yet they insisted that Mr. Stumps and Mr. Creakles should accompany him. They were the 'Old Guard' of secularism. Mr. Stumps, indeed, regarded Mr. Gifford's more refined methods with undisguised contempt. There was a painful want of acid in his oratory.

'Give the slaves of superstition the whip, sir,' he used to say.

He came to the conference determined that the extremest form of uncompromising scepticism should find expression. John Blunt made the fourth representative of the Freethought Association.

It was, as we have said, an odd group, and, as Mr. Looker, in his capacity of 'Chorus,' afterwards remarked, it resembled nothing so much as the sheet of Peter's vision. It held 'all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air, clean and unclean.'

Mr. Gifford had something knightly in the carriage of his head, the flash of his eye, and his long, flowing beard. He would have been a striking figure in any company. But Mr. Stumps, with his high cheek-bones, bristly hair, and hard and restless eyes, set in conflicting angles with each other, was commonplace; while Mr. Creakles resembled nothing so much as a reddish-grey fox, somehow clothed in human features and dress; but with the fox very imperfectly concealed. John Blunt was a plain, broad-faced, solid-bodied Englishman.

As the representatives of orthodoxy, there sat, with

Professor Gardner, Mr. Walton, Mr. Campbell, and Mr. Twitters, the Secretary of the Y.M.C.A. Mr. Sawders had been courteously asked to be present, but declined. He had no desire, he ruefully confessed, for any new experiments in controversy, for the present. Professor Gardner, with serious, deep-lined face—his jet-black hair frostily tipped with white—was a fine figure; Mr. Walton had the head of a patriarch with the eager eyes of an enthusiast; Mr. Campbell's wasted face had the pure lines of a saint.

Mr. Twitters was a little man, a walking book of quotations. He had never been known to produce an original idea in his life; but he knew one small section of English literature—controversial divinity—perfectly, and could quote at will, from almost any authority, on almost any point, and at any length. The chance of firing off a few of the quotations he had secreted with so much toil made him regard the conference as a golden opportunity.

'I think,' said Professor Gardner, 'we can start by giving each other credit for perfect sincerity and frankness; and we are not a mere debating society. We shall contend, not for victory, but for truth.'

A general murmur of assent followed his remarks, and Mr. Stumps, in particular, cried 'Ear, 'ear' with vigour.

'But we must start by knowing exactly how far we agree, and the point at which our differences begin. For example, Mr. Gifford, you don't deny the existence of a God?'

'We have wide liberty of opinion on that subject, in our Association,' said Mr. Gifford, with a slight air of discomfort; 'and some—my friend here, Mr. Stumps,

for example—hold that atheism is the only credible theory.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Stumps, delighted to find himself in evidence so early; 'I deny the existence of a God.'

The whole group regarded the valiant Mr. Stumps curiously. Mr. Walton, in particular, contemplated the little man with a look of mingled pity and half humorous wrath, which was, unhappily, quite wasted on its object.

'That is a big and courageous negative,' commented Professor Gardner, with a smile.

'Well, I am a convinced atheist,' said Mr. Stumps, 'and have the courage of my convictions. I always spell the word "God" with a small "g." What evidence have you to offer that God exists? Can you produce two persons who agree in their notions as to what God is? Experience is the only source of knowledge; and what "experience" has anybody had of God? Who has seen Him, or touched Him?'

'But, Mr. Stumps, "there is no God" is a very big negative, and requires a very big demonstration. Have you ever thought of how vast an area of knowledge is required to entitle you to make that assertion—how much you must know in order to know that there is no God? When Robinson Crusoe landed on his island, you remember, he was greatly concerned to know whether it was inhabited. A single footprint on the beach, or an old shoe under a tree, would have been a sufficient proof of the existence of inhabitants. But to be sure that nowhere an inhabitant existed, he must have explored every yard of the island's surface. And you, Mr. Stumps,

must know the whole contents of the universe before you are entitled to say that nowhere does it contain a God. Have you such an intimate acquaintance with the system of things, Mr. Stumps? How did you acquire it?’

‘John Foster says——’ began Mr. Twitters, with a trembling and eager voice.

‘Well, well,’ interrupted Professor Gardner, ‘we will not make John Foster a party to this debate at present.’

Mr. Stumps looked rather taken aback, and his leader, Mr. Gifford, gave him no help.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I know it’s hard to prove a negative, and perhaps I oughtn’t to have put it in that way. But can you prove the affirmative?’

‘We can afford to dismiss God from our thoughts if you can assure us He doesn’t exist, Mr. Stumps. But, as it happens, you can’t give us that assurance. On the largest reading of the evidences for atheism there yet remains a possibility that there may be a God. You can’t assure us that the universe is empty of Him.’

‘I agree with that,’ said Mr. Gifford, much to Mr. Stumps’s disgust.

‘Now, the possibility that He may exist creates a whole world of duty; duty of search after Him, of obeying what we may reasonably suppose to be His will. You may be morally judged by the way you treat that possibility.’

‘I agree with that too,’ said Mr. Gifford.

‘Butler says——’ began Mr. Twitters eagerly.

‘Yes, yes, we all know Butler’s argument,’ broke in Professor Gardner.

‘But there’s no certainty on one side or the other’ remonstrated Mr. Stumps.

'Suppose I admit that,' replied Professor Gardner—'though I don't—yet weigh the two uncertainties. "*It is certain no God exists*": you can build atheism on *that*! "*It is not certain God exists*": you cannot build even atheism on *that*! Why, religious duty springs into existence from that very uncertainty.'

'But I never heard an argument in support of God's existence which did not seem to be absurd,' protested Mr. Stumps.

'That perhaps only proves how little you have heard, Mr. Stumps,' replied Professor Gardner, with a smile. 'What do you say to the argument from design? You don't believe in a ship without a shipwright, or a watch without a watchmaker. Here is this great universe, as full of intelligent design as ship or watch, but all on a scale of infinite vastness. Must it not have had an intelligent Maker?'

Mr. Twitters was ready to spring into the debate with Paley, but was sternly suppressed.

'Nature produced all that,' said Mr. Stumps doggedly.

'But "Nature" is only God spelt with six letters instead of three.'

'No, I don't admit that,' objected Mr. Stumps.

'By Nature, then, you mean the sum total of phenomena?'

'Yes,' replied Mr. Stumps, half suspiciously.

'Your creed, then, is that the sum total of things produced each separate thing?'

'Mr. Stumps represents only a minority of our Association,' broke in Mr. Gifford abruptly; 'he does not represent my views. I hold atheism to be incredible. But, Professor Gardner, you are taking the wrong ground. You claim our faith. You must prove

something. Suppose you prove atheism wrong; you have not established Christianity.'

'That's just it,' said Mr. Stumps in tones of relief.

'You have complained of the size of Mr. Stumps's negative; but don't forget that you have a very spacious affirmative to prove.'

By this time Mr. Gifford had got into his lecturing stride.

'Let us come,' he cried, 'to close quarters. For my part I challenge the validity of the very title-deeds of Christianity. All religions run back into the realm of myth. The story of Jesus is a myth. The Gospels are not historical. No argument can prove their genuineness. If they are not mere literary forgeries they are, at best, unverified tales. Here is a gulf of nineteen stormy centuries, swept by invasions and revolutions, the blackest centuries known to history. Can you find, running through these centuries, an unbroken line of evidence to show that the biographies and letters of the New Testament were written by the men whose names they bear, at the time they pretend to be written; and that the writers were competent and honest witnesses? It is a long chain that stretches through nineteen centuries—and such centuries! The task is outside the range of possibility. If the title of a cowshed depended on your "evidence," you could not establish it in any court. You Christians expect us to risk our souls on evidence which would not convince a jury in a case of petty larceny.'

Mr. Walton, who had been listening with kindling eyes, here broke into the argument.

'You invert the problem,' he said. 'I don't believe in Jesus Christ because I am convinced that the New

Testament is "historic"; I believe the New Testament to be true because I know Jesus Christ to be real.'

'And what are the evidences which prove Jesus Christ to be a real person?' asked Mr. Gifford.

'The evidences,' replied Mr. Walton eagerly, 'are not a cluster of doubtful documents, about which men can wrangle; a chain of paper proofs. They are facts in the living world of to-day; facts in my own life and consciousness. It is not the miracles Christ performed, or—as you say—did not perform—nineteen hundred years ago, which convince me; it is His work in every street of this town; it is the miracle He has wrought in me! Look here, Mr. Gifford,' he went on, with kindling eyes, 'the fact that I am a sinner; that my sins have been pardoned; that a new spiritual force has entered my life—these are things that are attested by my consciousness. I know them exactly as I should know if the poison of a fever had burned in my blood, and had then been cooled. Christ is for me a daily presence. I live in His companionship. Every day I do a thousand things, which otherwise would be impossible to me, by the help He gives. You may wrangle over the dates and the authenticity of the written Gospels; but there is a living gospel in me of which my consciousness is witness. I know it as I know that my feet touch the earth beneath me, or that my eyes see the stars, or that my flesh is warmed by the sun. You waste time in trying to prove that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, or John the Fourth Gospel. You cannot prove my consciousness to be a lie! I am not an apologist, but a witness.'

'It would be rude to say you are mistaken, Mr. Walton,' replied Mr. Gifford; 'but your consciousness is only good for yourself. And these arguments from

subjective emotions are perilous. The imagination, you know, plays strange tricks. At any rate, a creed built on the subjective experiences of its adherents is built on a cloud. The world wants solid facts.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Walton, 'but what you call my 'subjective experiences' express themselves in facts. My life is changed by it; and I am not alone. We are a great cloud of witnesses. You shall find men under every sky, in every century, speaking all languages, and under all varieties of civilization and the want of civilization. They are educated and uneducated; sages and simple peasants; untaught women and great statesmen. But they all have this as a personal consciousness: a spiritual life born of Christ, rooted in Christ, fed by Christ. They talk the same language, breathe the same temper, strive after the same ideals. Now, imagination counts for much——'

'And there is an infection in crowds,' interjected Mr. Gifford.

'Yes, but here are men, separated by space, by time, by language, by blood, by unlikeness in training; yet they have exactly the same spiritual experience: a new life under the empire of new forces. For us Christianity does not depend upon documents about whose date and authorship critics may wrangle; or on miracles—if you like, dubious miracles—wrought nineteen centuries ago. It is the miracle in ourselves! We are Christ's witnesses,' said Mr. Walton, and as he spoke his face flushed, his eyes filled.

CHAPTER XII

A THEOLOGICAL ROUND-TABLE (Cont.)

‘THE argument from your consciousness is not valid for me,’ said Mr. Gifford gently. ‘I might put my own consciousness against yours. And your position is very illogical. You believe Christianity because it is true, and it is true because you believe it! When you carry the argument into the shadowy realm of what you call the ‘spiritual’ life, you leave solid ground. I demand evidences of which men’s senses can judge, and which are good for those who see them from the outside.’

‘Well, I can give you exactly those evidences. Don’t resolve the dispute into a wrangle about the dates of MSS., or the genuineness of miracles wrought on the other side of the world, and nearly two thousand years ago. I will show you miracles wrought to-day. Come with me down Rogues’ Lane, or into Angel Court, and I will show you drunkards made sober, and thieves become honest, and women who were once harlots and are now living lives of patient chastity. And what has done it all is the magic of Christ’s touch! What miracle can be greater than the transfiguration of a human life? The fact is undeniable. When a drunkard is converted, his wife’s face, his children’s dress, the food on his table, the furniture

in his house, prove the change.' The town lock-up proves it; for here is somebody who no longer troubles it; Such effects must have a cause. No process of evolution, no chain of natural forces, explains them. The man himself will tell you it is the grace of Christ which has done it all. And there are ten thousand times ten thousand others to whom the same experience has come, and who will tell you the same thing. How can you reject that evidence? I tell you, the clothes on a converted drunkard's wife and children are the "documents" which prove Christianity.'

'But,' said Mr. Stumps, with a grin, 'a Buddhist would say that he has a personal experience of the truth of the writings of Buddhism.'

'Where is your Buddhist?' asked Mr. Walton, with a touch of disconcerting fire. 'He does not exist! You invent him. Buddha does not bear to Buddhism, nor Confucius to Confucianism, the relation Christ bears to Christianity.'

'Yet,' said Mr. Gifford, 'the Koran certainly revolutionized the race which received it; and if a creed is to be justified, not by its historical proofs, but by its practical effects, this is an argument in favour of Mohammedanism, as well as of Christianity.'

'But,' asked Professor Gardner, breaking into the debate, 'what is the ennobling element in Mohammedanism? It is the doctrine of the unity of God, which is true, and which is borrowed from the Bible.'

'And what would your Mohammedan, if you caught him, declare?' demanded Mr. Walton. 'That he had a living companionship with Mohammed, and received power to win moral victories through him? Not a bit of it!'

'Some Mohammedans are a great deal better

than some professing Christians,' commented Mr. Stumps.

'How do you know?' asked Mr. Walton bluntly. 'Is Mohammedan Turkey as good as Christian England?'

Mr. Twitters here found his chance.

"Mohammedanism was founded in imposture, maintained by treachery, ratified in carnage, and crowned by licentiousness." And, proud of having got in one quotation without rebuke, Mr. Twitters smiled triumphantly.

'Is that your argument, Professor Gardner?' asked Mr. Gifford.

'Yes; Mr. Walton's position, expressed in scientific terms, is that the Christian religion is a question, not of archaeology, but of biology; not one of documents, but of life. You don't prove that a flower lives by botanical theories. Life proves itself. Disputes as to the dates and authorship of Christian documents are mere archaic curiosities. Does Christianity live? That is the only question worth asking; and on that the antiquarians are out of court. It does not belong to their art. Historic credibilities and incredibilities, the accents of witnesses dead for twenty centuries—these things do not count. The real historical records of Christianity are in the souls of men. This is not the only argument for Christianity; but it is legitimate, it is scientific, and I don't know how you are going to overthrow it.'

'But the Higher Critics——' began Mr. Gifford.

'The Higher Critics!' broke in Professor Gardner, 'are in furious civil war with each other. The guess of one scholar is the doubt of another; the logic of a third is the derision of a fourth. Christianity, with its

ethics, its enthusiasm, its supernatural authority over the human character—how can all this be resolved into a question of documents? Christianity is a scheme of morals plus a motive power. The only questions worth asking are: Is the ethical scheme sound? Is its motive power adequate? No third question is worth debating. You might prove the “genuineness” of all the Christian documents, and yet if it remained, as a scheme of life, powerless, what would it avail? Now, whether Christianity has power to change human life is a question, not for antiquarians, but for plain men, with eyes in their heads. So far I agree with Mr. Walton.’

‘But,’ asked Mr. Gifford, ‘do you give up the historical character of the Gospels, and undertake to produce their credentials out of your own consciousness, as a spider spins its web out of its own bowels?’

‘Not in the least,’ Professor Gardner answered, feeling the argument was drifting into his own special realm again. ‘We hold that the evidence for the Gospels and the Epistles are just as strong as those, say, for the writings of Caesar or of Tacitus.’

‘Well, you won’t expect me to prove a negative. You know, of course, that Strauss and Bauer have proved that the New Testament writings are mythical.’

‘I don’t admit that, and you mustn’t put Strauss and Bauer in the same scales. You ought to know that Bauer threw Strauss overboard as decidedly as Strauss threw John and Paul overboard. Strauss’s myth-theory, Bauer holds, won’t explain how the books came to exist. Strauss, too, began by one enormous assumption, that begged the whole question: the assumption that miracles were impossible. The verdict in his case is given before the trial begins. Now, the

true presupposition is that miracles, as part of the equipment of Christianity, are not only possible, but are, in advance, highly probable.'

'You beg the question, then, on the other side.'

'Not at all; but the figure of Christ, on the Christian theory, stands related to two great chapters of history; one antecedent, and one consequent; and It completes and explains them both. Taken in its historical connexion, Christianity may be expected to be attended with miracles. The blunder of Strauss and his school is that they take Christ out of His historical setting.'

'What do you mean!'

'All Jewish history goes before Christ, and leads up to Him. He is its completion. The great historic expectation of a Messiah, which lies at the root of Jewish history, finds its fulfilment in Christ. The story of the Jewish race is visibly the story of a great educational process, of which Christ is the consummation. And if a great history goes before Christ a great history certainly comes after Him—all Christian history! On any reading of that history you like it is the story of miracle. It has changed the face of the world. It has given new ideals to civilization. It has created saints, and inspired martyrs. It has revolutionized uncounted lives. Now, a Figure which stands between Jewish and Christian history, completing them both, is lifted out of the plane of the ordinary. Its contents, so to speak, must be supernatural. Miracles do not discredit that life. They accredit it. They are natural to it.

'If, indeed, you began to surround some commonplace life with a nimbus of miracles you would make it, and them, incredible. But you must take the whole of the Christian case. It claims that Christ stands

betwixt the two greatest chapters of human history, Judaism and Christianity. He is the completion of the one and the inspiration of the other. Then, for a life so out of the ordinary plane, phenomena transcending ordinary laws are not, in advance, incredible. The Christian documents are not to be, in this fashion, ruled out of court before the case is heard.'

'Well,' said Mr. Gifford, 'suppose we concede that. How do you build a bridge for human feet across nineteen hundred years? Here,' said he, taking up a New Testament, 'is a book in English. How can human wit guess—still less prove—that a given pair of hands, gone to dust nearly twenty centuries ago, wrote, in a language now dead, these particular pages? You know, of course, the Christian canon itself is no older than the Council of Trent; and that canon included the Apocrypha which you Protestants now reject. Fourteen books, that is, have already slipped out of the canon. May we not expect to see the other sixty-six follow!'

'Yes, but the question of what are the true text-books of the Christian faith is not to be settled by the vote of a Church Council three hundred years ago, but by the providence of God in history, and the Spirit of God working in the consciousness of His children.'

'And how will you prove that to the satisfaction of any decent jury?' demanded Mr. Stumps, in tones of disgusted incredulity.

'Well,' said Professor Gardner, the historian and the Scotchman all awake in him, 'let us take it step by step.'

How long the process lasted, or into what a wilderness of dates and authorities it rambled, it is unnecessary

here to describe. It is enough to record that it left the disputants flushed, unconvinced, and not too sweet-tempered.

Mr. Walton had been silent and restless during this stage of the debate. Tired at last of discussion, which left each party to it unpersuaded, he at last broke in.

'Tell us frankly, Mr. Gifford,' he asked, 'what is your own faith about God.'

'I do not deny that God exists, but we can know nothing about Him. He is unknowable, for ever unknowable. The little curve of our intellect cannot include Him.'

'Yet how much you must know about Him, to be able to assert that!' said Mr. Campbell, who, up to this point, had sat silent. 'You know so much about Him as to know you can know nothing! And what a reflection that whole theory is on God! He, the ruling Intelligence of the universe, exists; but He does not intend us to know the fact. He has planned our nature so as to make that knowledge impossible. Yet, somehow, we have guessed what He intended to conceal! Nay, out of this guess—which represents the defeat of God's purpose—we have evolved a religion, the most influential and beneficent force in human society!'

Mr. Walton here broke in again, bluntly:

'Let us know, Mr. Gifford,' he said, 'exactly what your position is about moral obligation. You cancel out God as a force in human life?'

'Well, He lies, as I have said, outside the possibility of our knowledge.'

'So that, as a force, He may be neglected? For all practical purposes is not that atheism?'

‘But I object to that term. I am not willing to be described as an atheist.’

‘Well, we won’t dispute over a word. But, for moral ends, God is non-existent? Then there is no moral law?’

‘Well, there is no external moral authority. But goodness is still good, and truth is true.’

‘But if a man does not see that—and he must use his own eyes—no obligation exists for him? That is, morality has no peremptory and universal authority?’

‘I don’t accept that conclusion.’

‘But if anybody else does you have no authority to say he is wrong?’

‘No,’ answered Mr. Gifford, half reluctantly.

‘Then, too, there is no future life, on your theory?’

‘Not for the individual; the race lives.’

‘But the individual dies? If good, there is no future heaven to reward; if bad, no future penalty to afflict?’

‘No.’

‘No God, no moral law, no future life? Mr. Gifford, what sort of a world will that give you? If I read history truly, the failure of atheism is writ large on every century.’

“‘It has befooled the worshippers,’” cried Mr. Twitters, breaking in with a new quotation; “‘it has betrayed the legislator, it has ruined the people!’”

‘Well, it has poisoned the wells of civilization. It has taken the salt out of human life. Had there been only the moral denials your creed represents, the race must have perished.’

‘But that is only your uncomfortable conjecture.’

‘No, it is a deduction which has on its side the whole stretch of human history.’

'Yes, Mr. Gifford,' Mr. Campbell said at last, 'your controversy is with God, not with us; and God will answer you. I recognize and admire your sincerity; but God will fill you in with your own doctrine. He will do it all the more surely because He loves you. Your teaching would kill all the effective motives to righteousness! It would destroy morality! And in some way that will touch yourself, or some one you love; you will be made to feel this.'

'I won't undertake any such uncomfortable, and perhaps not too courteous, prophecy,' said Professor Gardner, 'but I agree with Mr. Campbell that your belief would wreck society. There is no law, you say, laid on us by external authority. Our appetites are our laws. There are no penalties breaking out of eternity, and running through eternity, for the sins of Time. That must fatally weaken the barriers to wrong-doing.'

'But I deny that, in ethical quality, my creed is lower than Christianity,' said Mr. Gifford. 'It has an even loftier set of motives. It puts the welfare of the race above the welfare of the individual. There is no selfish individualistic heaven; but society is to endure, though the individual perishes.'

'Ah, but,' insisted Mr. Walton, 'the average man, beset by temptations, which are fierce and instant, won't find in your gospel any restraint, still less any inspiration.'

'I appeal to my consciousness,' said Mr. Gifford, with a smile, 'as Mr. Walton did to his.'

'But, remember, you were trained in Christian morals. You breathe an atmosphere charged with Christian elements. Let these be exhausted. Let your denial of all the characteristic beliefs and hopes of Christianity

take possession of the common mind, and you would have an ethical breakdown which would wreck society. Mr. Gifford,' said Mr. Campbell, lifting his hand, 'you are cutting the dykes which guard the life of the world from mere black floods of devastating vice.'

'I am sorry you draw a conclusion so alarming,' Mr. Gifford replied, with a smile; 'but I do not accept it. Since I must quote myself, I am not conscious of any loss of moral force since I abandoned historic Christianity.'

'Look at those violets,' said Mr. Walton, lifting up a tiny vase that held a cluster of those flowers. 'They keep their colour and their scent for a few hours, but they have no root. It's the decree of Nature that a rootless flower dies. And so will a rootless creed. Do you think you will keep for long the flower of a Christian morality divorced from the beliefs which are their root? Will your children keep the course after you have thrown overboard the compass? It is the second generation that tests a creed. Nay, you won't have to wait for a second generation. You leave goodness without a sanction and sin without a penalty. That's a desperate experiment! It will destroy mankind.'

'I don't admit it, or believe it,' said Mr. Gifford.

'Let facts tell,' cried Mr. Walton, rising.

As the party broke up, Mr. Campbell and Mr. Walton walked away together.

'Whatever else Mr. Gifford may do or not do,' said Mr. Campbell, 'he will effect a revolution in Middleford. Men and women, and theories and characters and friendships, will all be tested by his teaching, and will crystallize into new forms. He and his doctrine will pass away, but the town will never be quite the same.'

Mr. Looker at this moment joined the pair, and surveyed them with quizzical eyes.

'Well,' he said, 'my idea that your conference resembled the sheet of Peter's vision breaks down.'

'How's that?' asked Mr. Campbell, with a smile.

'Why, this particular sheet, with its contents, certainly hasn't been taken up into heaven again, has it? I see its contents, clean and unclean, walking off in all directions, and they're just as clean—or unclean—as they were before. Was this particular sheet, do you think, let down out of heaven, Mr. Campbell?' and Mr. Looker grinned satirically.

CHAPTER XIII

A CREED AT WORK

THE committee of the F.A. had met to discuss a novel, not to say a revolutionary, proposal.

John Blunt was a sober-minded, unimaginative Englishman, practical to his finger-tips. Theories were little to him, facts everything. He was galled by the charge that his new creed was morally impotent. Was it true that it could not reform a drunkard, or make a thief honest? Was it a fact that it could not cleanse a city slum, or even invent a hymn? He felt instinctively that a philosophy which evaporated in mere speech—no matter how eloquent—had no title to human respect. A creed, in the last analysis, must be judged by its power to colour life and shape character. Why should not the F.A., since it had a scientific creed, a popular leader, and ample funds, do, and do far better than the Churches, some of the reformatory work of the world?

He had vaguely contemplated a Freethought mission to some savage land. Why should not the new creed have its missionaries, and even its martyrs?

‘Martyrs were mistakes,’ was Mr. Creakles’s hasty comment when this suggestion reached his ears, ‘and missionaries are an impertinence.’

But their new creed, John Blunt insisted, would lack one of the necessary credentials of a religion if it could not evolve a Livingstone or a Moffat, in a highly improved form. But where could be found, say in the committee of the F.A. itself, or in the crowds who laughed and cheered under Mr. Gifford's eloquence, these potential Livingstones and Moffats, equipped with a new gospel of a scientific sort? John Blunt looked round him in vain for a possible missionary. Somehow, the new creed did not evolve the passion of zeal and pity which the despised Churches succeeded in producing, and which assured such an unbroken succession of self-sacrificing evangelists.

Then what could a Freethought missionary, if he were found, tell to a crowd of naked and spear-brandishing savages? What message had he which would transfigure them, as by a breath of divine magic; give them a written language, teach them to wear clothes, sing hymns, abjure a diet of human flesh, and rescue shipwrecked sailors, instead of knocking them on the head and cooking them?

'A missionary,' Mr. Creakles repeated, 'is only a bad variety of lunatic.'

'Missionaries,' said another member of the committee, 'are an impertinent interference with the natural liberty of the lower races.'

'Why should not the coloured races,' asked a third, 'have their own morality—and their own diet—and be content with it?'

'If you were shipwrecked in their neighbourhood,' said John Blunt rudely, 'you would hardly be content with it. You would probably wish that a Christian missionary had been there before you arrived!'

For this sentiment John Blunt was called peremptorily to order. But it was clear that if the idolatrous races of the world waited till Freethought missionaries taught them a better way of living, they would wait a very long while indeed.

But if the new creed was anything it was Humanitarian, written with a big H. Middleford was mottled with slums—mere leper's sores on the civic body. In these labyrinths of evil-smelling lanes all manner of foul diseases lurked. Vice—naked, ancient, and unashamed—walked about in the very daylight. Filth and poverty and drunkenness abounded. The Churches had their missions to these slums, and admittedly did much good by them. Why should not Freethought start a city mission of its own, on 'liberal' lines, and beat the Churches at their own work?

On this proposal the committee held high debate for some weeks. The proposal to do practical reformatory work, it was discovered, had, on a creed, the office of an acid on metal. It tested it. Many odd views came to the surface in the discussion.

Mr. Bagge, who owned fifteen public-houses in the town, had a natural and vehement dislike to all temperance agitations. Speech almost failed him, from mere depth of emotion, as he protested against the crime of 'robbing the poor man of his beer.' They must not preach a gospel of puritanical sobriety. This would dry up one great source of human enjoyment. Incidentally, it would ruin Mr. Bagge's fifteen public-houses!

Besides, how were they to fight, on secular principles, with the habit of drunkenness? They could not declare, with the exploded Bible, 'No drunkard shall

inherit the kingdom of heaven.' There *was* no kingdom of heaven ; or, at least, they must not assume that it existed. Drunkenness was to be opposed solely on physiological grounds. It must be classed, say, with indigestion, as a disease.

Then there were the sad garrisons of unsexed women. How would the new theology deal with them ?

Mr. Leech, who owned at least a dozen houses of ill-fame, and extracted fat rents from them, was an active member of the Association. He warned the committee that the question was very difficult. They agreed that the Decalogue was a fragment of fossilized ethics. It might have suited the Stone Age, but it was completely out of key with modern life. 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' was an injunction which certainly had no supernatural sanctions. They must consider the relation of the sexes in a courageous and 'liberal' spirit. They must listen to the best teachers of every creed, such as Plato, in his *Republic*.

Mr. Gifford said, 'Yes, but the world has grown since then.'

But it had not outgrown Plato, Mr. Leech hoped. They surely preferred the Greek theory of life and conduct to the gloomy and illiberal canons of an exploded Semitic theology. He believed that, in the *Republic*, what was called 'vice' was quite legitimate and respectable. They must pause before venturing to embark on a crusade against a social institution which a great genius and moralist like Plato looked on as legitimate, and even necessary.

Platonic ethics furnished the text for many daring suggestions.

At this point John Blunt, who knew little of Plato and the *Republic*, felt that the discussion was wandering into perilous realms, and he brought it abruptly back to safer and more practical ground.

‘Think of the poor fallen girls,’ he urged. ‘Can’t we do something to save them from their dreadful condition? Don’t we owe some debt of pity and help to wrecked womanhood? What are we to do with the poor things? Can’t the world be made cleaner and happier; and oughtn’t we to help in the business?’

Mr. Gifford shared, he said, John Blunt’s pity for the human débris about which they were talking; but a mission, he added, would be only possible where the missionary was equipped with a positive faith, and a definite morality, with adequate sanctions behind it. Now, Freethought had not yet reached that stage of development. What was called Christianity was nineteen centuries old; they had not been nineteen months in existence. They must give themselves time.

‘Ah, but,’ John Blunt replied, ‘Christianity went out to save the crowd directly it was born! And while we wait,’ he went on with pitying voice, ‘the poor creatures are dying, and drunkenness spreads, and little children are growing up with starved bodies and untaught brains. If we admit that we can’t cleanse a city slum, we may as well admit that the world has no place or use for us. We have got the money; we have got the faith; let us do the work!’

Finally it was agreed—though with many doubts and much half-angry reluctance—that a particular slum in the city, known as Angel Court, ancient, over-crowded, unwashed and wicked, should be chosen as the field for a

city mission on Freethought lines. But the first business was to find a missionary ; and here, at its very beginning, the whole scheme threatened to break down. The Churches, somehow, never failed to produce a succession of patient women and self-sacrificing men, who toiled in dark lanes, visited sick-beds, washed and taught little children. Their methods, no doubt, were often unwise. Their theology was narrow. Their tracts were, from a literary point of view, just subjects of derision. But they plodded on their errands of pity with untiring, if clumsy, feet ; and if they had all suddenly disappeared, every foul slum in Middleford would certainly grow fouler, and the tide of its misery would rise fast.

John Blunt looked round his own theological circle in vain for anything which would correspond to the Bible-woman, or the Sunday-school teacher, of the Churches. Why was this? he asked, with puzzled disquiet.

Perhaps it was natural that, on the feminine side, the Freethought Association should seem poorest of all. Its creed was, after all, a diet that best fitted the more robust male stomach. But male believers in Mr. Gifford's gospel were visibly the stuff out of which no art could ever construct a city missionary. Each adherent was content to be relieved of the outworn morality of the Churches ; but no new moral wardrobe took the place of these rejected ethical rags.

In an ethical sense, indeed, Mr. Gifford's followers were naked and not ashamed. The sense of pity for the morally fallen, and of any obligation to help them up again, was somehow attenuated. All that survived was a faint sense of compassion for certain physical wants—for hungry stomachs ; for ill-clad children ; for families

herded in squalid rooms foul as the dens of wild beasts, and as filthy.

John Blunt, however, realized, with some disquiet, that any sense of pity for men and women whose lives were spoiled by vice scarcely existed in his circle. Sin, in the new creed, was resolved into a superstition; and all the sentiments relating to it were subtly changed. The passion of moral pity for fallen men and women—so characteristic of Christianity—had disappeared; and, with it, had perished the sentiment that creates the missionary.

John Blunt, in a word, began dimly to realize that almost forgotten truth, that pity is the special product of Christianity. No other religion creates it, or even knows it. There are faint traces of it in the rarer and the loftier souls of heathenism—signs of that divine grace which works everywhere; but where Christianity is not, pity, as an active and imperious sentiment, exists no more than it does amongst the animals. Pity is the least hardy of the graces. It can live only in an atmosphere charged with Christian elements. Its decay is the first sign of a dying faith.

It was clear that the F.A. must undertake a strictly secular mission, working by secular motives, towards a purely secular reformation. Was it really true that 'the soul of all improvement is the improvement of the soul'? Secular philosophy rejected that much-quoted aphorism. Its aim must be to cleanse, not souls, but gutters; to create, not pure characters, but well-fed bodies. And this was not a gospel which needed, or could inspire, a missionary, still less a martyr.

It was settled, at last, that John Blunt must take

into his own hands the task of applying the gospel of Freethought to the conditions of life in Angel Court; and, to save his new creed from the reproach of barrenness, John reluctantly undertook the task.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW IT WORKED

ONE windy afternoon, John Blunt, in his new office of a secular evangelist, walked down Angel Court, looking with somewhat anxious eyes on the unpromising field where he was to sow the seed of the new gospel, and see it spring up—he hoped—in regenerated human lives.

There was a startling contrast betwixt the name of Angel Court and its character. Anything less ‘angelic’ than the foul passages, the dingy rooms, the unwashed tenantry of Angel Court, can hardly be imagined. John Blunt knew little of poets and of poetry; and if he had, it would yet have been impossible for him to quote Austin Dobson’s lines on another ‘Angel Court,’ since, as a matter of fact, they were not written at the time John began his missionary labours. But Austin Dobson’s lines might well be applied to the scene of John Blunt’s efforts:

In Angel Court the sunless air
Grows faint and sick; to left and right
The cowering houses shrink from sight,
Huddling and hopeless, eyeless, bare.
Misnamed, you say. For surely rare
Must be the angel shapes that light
In Angel Court!

Nay: the eternities are there—

Death by the doorway stands to smite;

Life in its garrets leaps to light;

And Love has climbed that crumbling stair

In Angel Court!

But John Blunt's plodding imagination could not discover 'the eternities' anywhere in Angel Court; and never before, perhaps, did so unhappy an apostle set out on a reforming mission. What, exactly, he was to preach, was not at all clear to John himself. Should he begin by trying to persuade the drunken husbands, the slatternly wives, and the untaught children of Angel Court of 'the non-historic character of Christianity'? But 'Christianity' was only an idle name to them. What use was it to slay the dead, or, rather, the unborn? Should he dwell upon 'the inexorable order of Nature'? But they knew nothing of 'Nature,' and were indifferent to its 'order.'

Mr. Gifford's favourite theme was the persistency of the race; the immortality of human society. But most of the inhabitants of Angel Court were in open quarrel with 'society.' It was represented chiefly, to them, by the pockets they could pick, and the constables whom they feared. It was idle to try to kindle them into the enthusiasm of a higher life by teaching them that pockets and police were parts of an eternal system of things.

John Blunt might demonstrate to a drunkard, with the cogency of the multiplication-table itself, that drunkenness did not pay. But he could not say that it was wrong; and he could not dwell upon any 'payment' and 'loss' other than that capable of being expressed in physical terms, or in £ s. d.

He could not, that is, appeal to the conscience; for this organ was only part of the machinery of superstition.

Could he discourse on a Saviour? Ah! that would be a tale to tell! The story of the Magdalen and the Christ, with that strange whisper—as if out of far-off heavenly realms—supposing any such existed—‘Thy sins are forgiven thee’! Somehow, that tale never seemed, to John Blunt, so divine and moving as when he walked past the filthy alleys of Angel Court, and meditated on the puzzling problem of how to sweeten and cleanse them.

Surely these poor lapsed creatures needed, not lessons in physiology, or instruction in the mythical character of Christianity, or explanations of ‘the inexorable order of Nature.’ They wanted the message of a divine Redeemer; of the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep; of a heavenly order, where the inequalities of this imperfect world will be rectified, and its sorrows eternally healed. John Blunt, in brief, as he stood in Angel Court, trembled on the verge of what Mr. Creakles would have regarded as a very damnable heresy. He almost wished Christianity were true! He felt, for one tempestuous moment, that it *ought* to be true! True or false, it was exactly what Angel Court needed. But what a scandal it would be if the apostle of Freethought lost his own faith in trying to impart it to others!

John Blunt felt that if he hesitated longer he would never begin at all. He turned abruptly into the first open door he saw, and clambered up some unlit and evil-smelling stairs. On the second landing a door half open, and with one hinge loose, seemed to invite his entrance. He knocked faintly; then more loudly;

then louder still. At last a gruff voice bade him 'Come in.'

The room was rank with the odours of frowsy linen, of ancient soapsuds, of primitive cooking processes; and through the unclean atmosphere ran a sour flavour of stale beer. The occupants of the room consisted of a slatternly woman with unkempt hair, three crying children, and a sulky man, hat on head, with bristly chin and gloomy eyes.

'Well, friends,' said John, 'can't we mend all this?' looking round on the stained walls, the broken furniture, the unwashed floor, and the yet more plainly unwashed occupants.

'Well,' demanded the man with the bristly chin, 'and what business may that be of yours?'

'Perhaps none, but wouldn't you like to have decent clothes, and three meals a day, and a few flower-pots in that window, and these children all at school?'

'Oh, we had all that once,' said the wife venomously, 'but Sandy here poured them all down his ugly throat. And if we had them again they would all go to the till in the White Horse round the corner.'

'Wife,' said the husband, by way of affectionate admonition, 'shut thy mouth! But, I say, master,' he added, turning to John Blunt, 'are you going to help us? If so, hand out the cash!'

'You must help yourself,' said John sturdily, 'before any one else can help you.'

'Thank you for nothing,' was the man's answer. 'Are you the new missionary?'

'I come from the Freethought Association, I don't preach the Bible. We know that isn't true; and I

have no cant about heaven or hell. Yet you are a man. You belong to all other men——'

'Hanged if I do!' ejaculated the man with the bristly chin.

'Why don't you help to make the world better by making yourself better?' asked John.

'What do I care for the world?' said Sandy. 'What has it ever done for me? But you've found out the Bible isn't true, have you? I haven't seen it in the papers. How did you find it out?'

'Well,' replied John, 'I needn't trouble you about that.'

'But I'm uncommon glad to hear it,' commented Sandy. 'That makes things pleasant. A man may do as he likes now.'

'No, no!' said John hastily. 'That's wrong. You must respect yourself and the race to which you belong.'

'But why?' asked the man, with inconvenient pertinacity. 'The race has done nothing for me, and I don't see anything particular about it to respect. But, old fellow, have you got half a crown in your pocket to help us? I have listened to you, and one good turn deserves another.'

'Don't give it to him,' screamed the wife. 'He'll only spend it at the White Horse, and be a terror to us when he comes home. Give it to me!'

'Why shouldn't I knock it down?' demanded Sandy defiantly.

John looked at the two faces; one brutal with vice, the other haggard with care, and both greedy for money. What message had he for them? He thrust half a crown into the woman's hands; and, as he

groped his way down the stairs, he heard the pair fiercely quarrelling over the coin—the woman's screams, the man's oaths, the cries of the children. His half-crown had only served to kindle a yet hotter flame of strife in Sandy's domestic circle. John Blunt felt painfully that his career as an apostle ought to be brief if he had nothing better than that quarrel-breeding half-crown to give to such a household.

John next knocked, with reluctant fingers, at a door in a line of cottages of evil fame, known as Gay Villas. A girl with half-fastened dress, one hand meanwhile gathering up a loop of untidy hair, opened the door.

'Come in, old fellow,' she said, with an indescribable look.

'I'm a missionary,' explained John Blunt hastily; 'a missionary from the Freethought Association. I have come to see if I can do you any good.'

'A missionary from what?' demanded the girl.

'From the Freethought Association.'

'And what has it got to say to us? You are the fellows who hold the meetings in the theatre on Sunday nights, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, we've fine times here, after your meetings are over! And you've turned Jesus Christ out of Middleford, have you?'

'Well,' said John, 'He never was in it.'

'What have you got to say to us poor creatures, then? Why, it's your Mr. Leech who collects our rent every Monday morning; and cruel rent it is.'

'My poor girl,' said John, trying to get to business, 'I pity you. You might all have been happy wives and mothers.'

'Man, you are ower late with that talk, said one poor, haggard girl, evidently suffering from consumption. 'Here we are, like the mud of the street, and sermons are wasted on us. Can you mend us?'

John Blunt discovered that his hearers were not unwilling to talk about themselves, and weep easy tears over their own spoiled lives.

'What respectable house,' asked one fierce-faced girl, 'would take one of us as a servant? Would you tell a decent workman to come to Gay Villas for a wife? What would you do with us?'

John Blunt took refuge in generalities.

'Well,' he said, 'begin by respecting yourselves. Be honest women.'

'And starve; or die in the gutter!' sneered the fierce-faced girl. 'No, thank you.'

'Man,' said one girl, with gloomy, deep-set eyes, 'that old Bible had something to say to us. It told us of Jesus Christ, and how He helped the poor women of His time. Oh, if He came to Middleford, there would be some chance for us! If I had lived by what I learned in the Sunday school I should be a happy woman to-day.'

John tried to explain that the teaching of the Sunday schools was deplorably erroneous; that delightful as might be the dream of a miraculous Christ, it was only a dream, and they must stick to realities. But his audience listened with angrily incredulous stare.

'Do you say there never was any Jesus Christ? Why, you make life a worse hell than it was before.'

'You needn't come here,' said the fierce-faced girl, with emphasis, 'if that's all you've got to tell us poor girls.'

John began to expound the changeless and mighty 'order of Nature,' with the design of showing that they might enlist its force on their side if they tried to reform; but he was not allowed to reach that stage of his argument.

'That means,' said one girl abruptly, 'that when a poor soul is down there's no chance of getting up again. Eh, it's the devil's work to tell us that. That's just what he's always telling us.'

'Old fellow,' summed up one of them, 'send for a jug of beer, and let's have a good time.'

John struggled out, followed by wild laughter and shrieks of abuse. The new gospel, somehow, didn't work in Gay Villas.

One little angle of Angel Court, more rank and gloomy than the rest, was familiarly known as Thieves' Lane. This constituted a sort of human rabbit-hutch, packed with a collection of thieves and their women-kind, a little garrison of men, women, and children in open warfare with society, and with all that society values. Now, John Blunt was both honest and courageous. He wanted to try his new gospel on the worst examples of humanity discoverable anywhere, and he resolved on paying a visit to Thieves' Lane, as an apostle of honesty—of honesty built on a purely secular basis. Here, surely, he would be on simpler and safer ground than when dealing with the frowsy tenants of Gay Villas.

Yet as he commenced mentally to set in order the arguments for honesty which Mr. Gifford's lectures yielded, he became ruefully conscious that they were of a very attenuated kind, and did not lend themselves to very peremptory expression.

He found himself, once more, to his own surprise,

almost regretting that he could not fall back on the stern simplicity of 'Thou shalt not steal,' with the thunders of some supernatural Sinai still vibrating in every syllable of the great sentence. He could not talk of any eternal right and wrong; for the very word 'eternal' was hardly in his vocabulary. 'The welfare of society,' in his ethics, took the place of the authority of some remote Sinai. Yet, how would the claims of 'society' tell on the imagination of the inhabitants of Thieves' Lane, who only knew of society as the common enemy, with the constable as its unpleasant representative?

John Blunt, however, with sincere if dogged purpose, resolved to make the experiment. He stumbled up the narrow stairs, and groped his way across a foul landing into a room where sat three men playing cards and smoking; a slatternly woman, on a turned-up bucket, was nursing an unwashed baby.

'Well, governor, what do *you* want?' asked—after a prolonged stare—the eldest of the card-playing trio.

His closely cropped hair told of a recent jail delivery; his furtive and shifty eyes spoke the thief. On his head was a soiled billycock, round his hairy throat a red handkerchief was twisted; a broken nose told of some ancient and desperate combat. A less promising subject for a discourse on ethics could hardly be imagined.

'Well,' said John Blunt, 'I am on a friendly errand. I belong to the Freethought Association. We want to help you fellows, if we can. You don't seem very well off here. You are always getting into trouble with the police. Jail bread is dry, and jail beds are hard. Can't we help you to do better, somehow?'

His remarks were received with chilling silence, while the three sets of dirty fingers one after another kept busily dealing the still dirtier cards, exactly as though John Blunt were non-existent. After a pause, John took up his argument afresh.

'Come, lads, I'm not a city missionary. I'm not going to preach to you about hell and heaven and the Bible. The world has outgrown these things. But you are fighting with society; with the whole system of things. And you might just as well go and butt your heads against a locomotive. The locomotive won't suffer, but your heads will. There's a better way than all this. Honest work pays better than stealing. Can't I help you to get work?'

'Well, governor,' said the broken-nosed man, 'you are a new kind of parson, and you seem to have got a new Bible. That's good news, for the old one was all on the side of the beaks and of the rich people.'

'Yes,' exclaimed John, with energy, glad to find at last a point in common with his hearers, 'the old Bible is as dead as Queen Anne.'

'Well,' asked another of the group, a man with keen, thin face, and cruel lips, 'what sort of a Bible is yours? Does it take the "not" out of all the commandments?'

'No, no,' said John hastily, 'the "not" is still in, right enough; but it's put in on a new principle. To steal is an injury to society, and you are part of society; so it is a wrong against yourselves.'

'The regular Bible-reader says that stealing is a sin against God. So is "society" the God of your Bible?' asked the thin man.

'No,' said John again, with much emphasis, 'we don't need to talk about what nobody understands. Leave

"God" to the parsons, and stick to realities. It doesn't pay to steal. Honesty, in the long-run, gives better wages than dishonesty. It means shorter hours, and lighter work, and more pay, and better meals. Thieving means rags, and hunger, and the policeman's handcuffs, and the jail-cell.'

'That depends on how the thieving's done,' suggested the thin-faced man.

'And on whether you are caught,' added the third man, with a grin.

'But,' asked the thin-faced man, 'isn't Mr. Bagges a shining light in your Association? And he's about the biggest thief in Middleford. It isn't honesty that filled his pockets, is it?'

John Blunt couldn't pretend that it was. Mr. Bagges was the keenest usurer and the most remorseless rogue in Middleford.

'And does that rogue Bagges,' demanded the broken-nosed man, with an oath, 'send you here to tell us that roguery doesn't pay?'

'Oh,' said John Blunt, 'Mr. Bagges is a member of our Association; but we are not responsible for him. There are rogues everywhere. But even if he is the biggest scamp in Middleford, what I tell you is true. You fellows are making a bad business of your lives. You work harder, and get less for your work than if you were ditchers and hedgers. And you are always being hunted by the police, and never sure when you won't find yourselves in jail.'

'But the life suits us,' said the thin-faced man; 'we take our chance. It's our wits against the world. Sometimes we are flush, and sometimes we are starved; and if we are copped it's the jail, sure enough. But

what's the odds? And we are not such rogues, after all, as your Mr. Bagges. And the difference betwixt a thief and an honest man, according to you,' he went on, 'is that one is better paid than the other. But if I make a good haul that's not true. And if it happened to be the other way round, and the plunder was big enough, and nobody knew, it would, according to you, be all right to steal?'

'No, no. If every man was a thief it would destroy society, and so a thief is an enemy of his kind.'

'Well, society is hard enough on us,' said the thin-faced man. 'It has never done anything for us except set the policeman on our tracks. Why shouldn't it be destroyed?'

'Come, old fellow,' said the thin man, 'did you never do any prigging on your own account?'

'Never!' replied John, with red-faced emphasis. 'Never!'

'But if it paid you, wouldn't you do it?'

'Never,' John answered, with dignity.

'But why not?'

John felt it difficult to explain, since his chief argument—the welfare of society—had no authority whatever on his immediate audience. The men had dropped their cards, and gathered round him, in the eagerness of debate, rather closely; and, as John rose to go, one of the men jostled against him.

'Come again, old man,' said the leader of the group. 'We like to hear you talk. At least, you've got no cant about you.'

'And bring that rogue Bagges next time,' added the thin-faced man, 'and let him preach a sermon to us on how honesty pays!'

John Blunt emerged from the filthy lane into the scarcely less filthy court with bewildered feelings. Had he converted his hearers, or had they converted him? It was not quite so easy to construct on secular principles a working theory of honesty which should be entirely convincing in its logic.

Here John felt for his pocket-handkerchief, but discovered that it had vanished. His watch, too, was gone, and his pocket-book. His interesting flock had picked his pockets while listening to his demonstration of the superior advantages of honesty!

CHAPTER XV

AN EXPERIMENT IN YOUTH

JOHN BLUNT had the Englishman's characteristic obstinacy. He was not easily persuaded to give up a task to which he was pledged ; and for many hot and evil-smelling afternoons he toiled and argued in Angel Court ; but always without results, or with results which sorely disconcerted him.

As, for example, he walked discomfited down the stairs of one of the court's worst tenements one afternoon, he heard, through a half-open door, the sound of bitter and hopeless weeping ; and, pushing the door back, he looked into the room. A little coffin, with lid athwart, was placed on the rough table. A cracked tumbler, with some pallid flowers, stood at its head. A woman, with apron thrown over her face, was rocking herself to and fro, and weeping. The scene told its own tale : a dead child, a desolate mother.

John Blunt stood looking on, with pitiful eyes. Human grief, no matter how rough its dress, or clumsy its utterance, has always a pathos of its own. What could he do ? The woman lifted her head ; the apron fell from the deep-lined and tear-wet face.

'Are you the new missionary ?' she asked.

'No,' replied John. Then, correcting himself, he said, hurriedly, 'Yes, I am the new missionary.'

'Ah: well, come in and read a chapter,' said the woman, rising and dusting, with her tear-moistened apron, a chair. 'It may do me some good. There's naught else.'

But John could read no 'chapter.' The extracts from Herbert Spencer, which Mr. Gifford was accustomed to read, as a diviner kind of Scripture, John felt would be distressingly out of place here. He found it necessary to keep to the safe ground of purely material wants. Could he help her in any way?

'Well, a few shillings always helped,' the woman admitted; but the funeral club allowance would pay for everything.

'But, eh! man,' she cried, with a new burst of sobs, 'what I want is my little lass. She was just the one flower we had. It will be a black world without her. And there's nae comfort, nae comfort!'

John ruefully agreed with this statement.

'But,' said the woman, with a break in her sobs, 'the Bible's always good; so sit you down and read a while.'

'But I have no Bible,' John replied hurriedly.

'What have ye, then?' asked the woman, with wide-open eyes.

'Well,' John stammered, 'I want to help you; though I don't pretend to explain that,' he added, with pointed finger at the coffin.

'But you wouldn't take away from me what the Bible says, would you?' asked the woman. 'Have you a better book?'

'A better book!' John felt instinctively that even Mr. Gifford's *Freethought Triumphant* was hardly, for purposes of comforting such a grief as that on which he looked, a 'better' book than the non-historic

Bible. And he felt curiously reluctant to attempt making the poor mother's grief less by explaining to her convincingly that the Bible was non-historic. In his perplexity John Blunt once more almost wished, with a certain note of anger, that the Bible were true! Human life, in Angel Court at all events, seemed to need it.

The woman, meanwhile, watched him with a face that grew steadily grimmer.

'What!' she asked, 'are ye one of these new lights that want to rob us poor folk of heaven? And this world so hard to us! And would ye say that my little lass is no' in heaven? Man, if that's your gospel, you're not wanted in Angel Court! It's black enough as it is. Do 'e want to make it blacker, with your devil's message?'

Then, with a fierce intensity that made John shiver, she went on:

'Gang awa', man! Ye seem a decent body. There's enough doing the devil's work without your help.'

John tried to remonstrate; but language somehow failed. He turned and crept down the stairs. As he went down, the Bible-woman was coming up, New Testament in hand. What message would she bring, John speculated? The music of an ancient chapter, which John once learned at his mother's knee, began to sing itself in his brain, '*Let not your heart be troubled . . .*'

Well, the despised Bible-woman had a message. Pity it was not true! Oh, the pity of it! the pity of it!

John Blunt took a week to recover from the disgusted despair created by his latest experience as a purely secular missionary. He was disposed to abandon the

attempt to reform the grown-up inhabitants of Angel Court; but why not try the young? It is true his recollections of the gamins of the Court—unwashed, hard-faced, unlovely, with all the sleepless hunger of predatory animals, and much of their cunning—did not encourage him. But their youth ought to be charged with at least some faint susceptibilities of improvement. He resolved he would establish a Sunday school on a new and purely secular basis.

It is true he did not like the term 'Sunday school.' It reeked of 'superstition'! But the school must be held on a Sunday, as this was the only day on which the industrial hum of the town was hushed. So a room was secured, and Angel Court was canvassed for scholars.

This proved unexpectedly successful. The shrill-voiced, much-harassed mothers of the Court were glad to get rid of their offspring, if only for one brief hour in the week; and curiosity—with a prophetic sense of future buns and tea—attracted the youth of the Court to the room, where a staring placard announced that 'The Freethought Sunday School' had taken up its abode.

On the Sunday afternoon chosen for beginning operations, John Blunt found himself with some thirty boys and girls as his flock. They were typical street arabs, with the ethics and the habits of the gutter; and John contemplated them with an emotion of something like despair. He had tried—but tried in vain—to secure a staff of helpers; Smears especially being strongly pressed to join in the enterprise.

'Why should I?' asked Smears; 'or why should you? What will you do with the gutter-rats when you get them? What can you tell them which they can understand, or which will help to make them

anything better than gutter-rats? Let the Bible-woman have them! She will teach them to sing "Gentle Jesus" and "Heaven is my home." It's not true, of course. It's only a dream. But, man! that lie is better than any truth you have got to tell them. Leave them to their dreams. Would to God I could dream again!'

But John Blunt, though keenly disappointed at Smears's view of the matter, held grimly to his plan. The light must be spread, no matter how dingy its lustre. And his new creed must have a chance of showing its reforming virtue.

John Blunt had not imagination enough to prepare plans in advance. He had to wait till his Sunday school took concrete shape before he could decide how to treat it. And now, as he contemplated his flock—as shy as so many rabbits without being as harmless, or as clean—poor John felt himself almost in a state of mental bankruptcy.

The singing was the strong point of the orthodox Sunday schools; but, curiously enough, secularism does not lend itself to the production of hymns. It refuses to be translated into musical terms! John Blunt tried in vain to remember, or to discover in Freethought literature, a hymn suited to a Sunday school of its own creed. Mr. Gifford was able to explain this difficulty, but not to remove it.

'Hymns,' he said, 'are the language of emotion. Our creed, as yet, is an intellectual process. It has not allied itself to the emotions, or taken them captive. It has not invaded the realm of the imagination. All this will come in time; but at present its appeal is purely to the intellect; and intellect and hymns are parted from each other by an impassable gulf.'

His explanations soothed John Blunt's self-respect, but did not solve his difficulty. He was an intense patriot, and thought of beginning with 'God save the Queen'; but, on further consideration, a fatal strain of bad theology was discoverable in the National Anthem itself. It would be absurd to bring into the opening exercises of a Freethought Sunday school a remote abstraction named 'God,' who must afterwards be disowned. John felt he must be consistent. Superstition was superstition, though expressed in terms no matter how melodious, or in music no matter how patriotic. He could not bring himself to teach his pupils to ask, or to expect, that 'God' would 'save' the Queen, or anybody else. The Queen, like everybody else, was a matter of no concern whatever to that passionless 'stream of tendency,' which was the only 'God' John's theology knew.

Yet singing seemed essential, so John took a vote of his pupils on the subject, and they, after a stormy debate, which occupied most of the afternoon, decided in favour of a local and well-known ditty, entitled 'Jack Sprat.' Grammar was non-existent in the song; its morality was worse than doubtful; it was thick and slab with slang. It recited how its hero, Jack, tricked the 'bobbies,' and got the better of the publican. But at least it went with a swing, and thirty youthful voices—though, alas! with nothing of the softness of youth in them—recited how—

Jack Sprat
Killed the cat,
And made a hole in the Bobby's hat.

John Blunt had to determine his own scheme of ethics. What virtues should he try to enforce on the

bare-footed youths and ragged maidens of Angel Court? He began with Temperance. He was sure of his ground in dealing with such a vice as drunkenness. It was the familiar habit of Angel Court, and it meant empty pockets and poisoned blood. It effloresced in rags. It wrote its hieroglyphics of pain on every woman's face and every child's body in the Court.

John couched his first temperance address in the form of a parable. He told them the immortal story of 'Jack the Giant-killer'; and, as it was absolutely new to most of his youthful hearers, it met with stormy applause. But the moral stuck out too obviously in the fable. Jack, in John Blunt's version, was a virtuous youth who washed himself no less than twice a day, and heroically rejected the insidious charms of beer. The giant, who ground the bones of his victims to make his own bread, was a too obvious transcript—ten feet high and twice ten feet in girth—of Mr. Grimes, who kept the White Horse Hotel—the public-house principally affected by the conscript fathers of Angel Court.

The listening boys and girls, with shrill outcries of contempt, rejected the moral of John Blunt's apologue. Jack the Giant-killer, turned into an animated and moral object-lesson, was loudly declared to be a 'softy,' and a 'spoon,' and John Blunt's excursion into the realms of parable ended in mere disaster.

John hereupon determined that, in future, he would stick to the solid ground of fact. It suited his practical mind better than parable. He called physiology to his aid; and the walls of his Sunday school were decorated with inflamed and alarming diagrams illustrating the effects of alcohol on the digestive organs into which it was poured. The boys, however, insisted

on discussing the diagrams from the severely pictorial standpoint; and they loudly assured John Blunt that they could draw better 'picturs' themselves than those he offered them.

Yet another disconcerting result followed. On the next Sunday afternoon a burly figure, red-faced with much beer, and clad in dingy fustian, lounged into the Sunday school, cap on head, and in stentorian tones demanded 'What the d—— Mr. Blunt meant by drawing a libellous picture of his—the red-faced man's—stomach, and exhibiting it, to the derision of the entire youth of Angel Court?' He proposed to make a similar exhibition of John Blunt's internal system if the pictures were continued.

Mr. Grimes, too, understood that John Blunt had been disparaging the quality and effects of the gin he dispensed at the bar of the White Horse, and he threatened loudly to 'smash' the unfortunate John Blunt's countenance by way of revenge. He did not actually attempt this, however, for John's features had a grimness which seemed to suggest that the process of 'smashing' would be attended with considerable risk to the operator who attempted this performance. The entire Sunday school, it may be added, gathered round the pair with delighted countenances, and expressed their disgust in shrill rhetoric when Mr. Grimes backed out of the door without coming to personal combat.

By this time the public sentiment of the court was hostile to this latest experiment in Sunday schools. The curiosity of John Blunt's scholars was satisfied; buns seemed remote, or even hopelessly improbable; and they suddenly and simultaneously fluttered away, like a cluster of city sparrows, or a covey of frightened seagulls.

When they had gone John looked round on the empty forms, the broken windows, the picture sheets hanging in rags from the wall. His flock had left ugly memorials of their flight. He locked the door, and walked away, with the memory of one more failure rankling bitterly in his brain.

Was it the case that his new theology did not hold the key of the restless, mysterious human heart; or only that his fingers were too clumsy for its use? That must be it! Not that his creed was wrong; he did not know how to explain it, to apply it, to prove it.

CHAPTER XVI

WHY IT FAILED

As John Blunt, forsaken by his youthful flock, walked, with tired feet and hanging head, along the street, there broke out on the quiet air of the Sunday afternoon about him a sudden burst of music. Childish voices, at once shrill and sweet, seemed to be mounting higher and higher, in a tumult of thrilling sound, to the sky. The sound burst with such a thrilling shock on John Blunt's ears that he was startled. He stopped breathless, and looked round. It might have been a strain out of the blue, a fragment of some angelic song falling through the commonplace air.

As John Blunt still stared, with wondering eyes, he found himself standing opposite the prosaic-looking Methodist Sunday school. The children were singing their closing hymn. The words grew clearer as he listened. They syllabled themselves in his ears :

Little children, little children,
Who love their Redeemer,
Are His jewels, precious jewels,
His loved and His own.

The lines were not poetry ; or they were poetry such as a child might write and a child sing. No philosophy was in them, no 'science,' and scarcely even sense

or rhyme. Yet how the children sang them! How natural that burst of exultant song seemed, climbing still higher in the quiet air :

Like the stars of the morning,
His bright crown adorning,
They shall shine in their beauty,
Bright gems for His crown.

Looked at in cold print, and tried by any decent literary test, the lines were tawdry. But suddenly translated into music, and poured upon the shaken air from the lips of an unseen multitude of children, they were transfigured. Perhaps if John had seen the actual human children singing—little hot-blooded commonplace boys and girls—the spell might have been broken. But it was a mere song, vibrating in the air; a tumult of happy voices poured out from unseen lips, and floating heavenward. It justified itself. The over-arching heavens seemed to listen to it, to smile on it. If angel-voices did break the ancient silence of the firmament, this is how they would sing.

As John Blunt lingered, half entranced by the sound, the door of the school opened, the children poured out, flushed, clamorous, restless; a moment later came the teachers, and, last of all, Kate Arden.

She smiled pleasantly at John as she passed. They were old friends. His Jean, indeed, had been in Miss Arden's Sunday-school class, and that thread of sacred memory still knitted the two together, in spite of the separating force of unlike creeds. As Kate passed, some sore and half-jealous sense of failure stirred in John Blunt.

'Well, Miss Arden,' he said, 'your Sunday school succeeds, at all events.'

‘And does not yours?’ asked Kate.

‘No, they are all gone. I haven’t the art to keep them. I am too clumsy. I have no hymns for them. I suppose our creed is for men, not for children. But we shall have hymns some day.’

‘Well,’ Kate answered, ‘when your creed takes to singing, no doubt the world will listen. But won’t you find it rather hard to set Mr. Stumps to music, John?’

‘Well, perhaps,’ he admitted. ‘But hymns are not everything. They are not even poetry, and poetry is less than science. We, Miss Kate, stick to science.’

‘But a science which does not take account of all the facts of the world, John—of God, of sin, of love—is, after all, very one-sided.’

‘Well, I tried to teach them as good morality as you teach them here.’

‘All morality is loving Jesus Christ, and walking in His steps,’ said Kate, ‘and you see you have no Christ, Mr. Blunt.’

‘Nor have you, Miss Arden ; your “divine Redeemer” is only a dream.’

‘Ah, you don’t know Him, John ; some day, perhaps, you will,’ Kate added softly. ‘But have you no newer and better morality to give to the children than our “dream” teaches us?’

‘Oh, morality is the same for all the creeds,’ John admitted. ‘I have tried, of course, to teach them not to lie, nor to steal, nor to fight. But, somehow,’ he said, with characteristic honesty, ‘I haven’t the trick of the teacher.’

‘Your creed leaves you nothing to teach. You borrow the morals of Christianity and you leave out its reason and its motives ; and you can’t invent any new motives of your own. Your religion is a tea-kettle with

no fire under it,' and Kate's eyes shone with humour. 'You will say it is a woman's theory, John; but love for another, and the sense of being loved, are the only forces that can change character. Now, your secular creed gives you no object to love, and no message that you are loved, does it?'

'It sticks to facts,' said John Blunt sturdily.

'No,' replied Kate, with a sudden lighting of her face, 'it leaves out the Fact of facts, the secret of all happiness, and the spring of all goodness—God's love! Isn't that a gospel for children, at least, and one to fill a child's heart and imagination?'—and she softly sang the words:

'Little children, little children,
Who love their Redeemer,
Are His jewels, precious jewels,
His loved and His own.'

'Yes,' said John, 'but it isn't true.'

'Don't you wish it were true?—true,' she added, with a soft fall in her voice, 'for your own little Jean?'

John cleared his voice, which had grown curiously husky, before he could answer. Then, with a break in his tones, he said:

'Yes, Miss Arden, yes! But truth is more than dreams,' and he hurried away, while Kate looked after him with pitying eyes.

John began dimly to realize that what he wanted was a 'religion'; a force, that is, which broke out upon men from another world. A religion, with its whisper of a life to come; its revelation of divine love; its voice of law from without, answered and reverberated by the voice of conscience within; its vision of a Father; its promise of eternal compensations. If that were true it

would suit Angel Court admirably. John Blunt once more found himself wishing it *were* true. An absurd anger, even, kindled in him because it was *not* true! Calvary, with its dying Christ, and its message of Eternal Love; a city of God, descending out of heaven; a supernatural regeneration,—yes, these were the true forces for slum work.

To take a cluster of little, half-selfish virtues—mere secular prudences; to be sober; to be frugal; to keep the streets swept and the drains flushed—was this the way to redeem the soul of man and build the city of God on earth?

Imagine all these small, prudential virtues buttoned up in one poor human body. The result might be a man as patient as a Fakir, as passionless as a Stoic, as frugal as a Hindu ryot. But he might be without a brain, or conscience—selfish, joyless, morose; as melancholy as Shakespeare's Jacques, but without his poetry. It wasn't worth while reforming the race on those lines, and for such an end!

Yet John Blunt finally decided that morals must be, for the present, omitted from his scheme of reform. The ethical system of the new creed was clearly not at the stage which lent itself to vulgar use! It was difficult to justify it against the rough logic of despairing women and drunken men, and hot human passions generally. He must aim at purely secular results, and must reach them by purely secular methods. It was a question of lower rents and of better drainage; of baths and parks and schools.

But here, again, a doubt haunted John's mind. Would the most perfect system of drainage and free baths change the moral character of the denizens of Angel Court? If he could capture a dozen street

arabs, clothe them decently, wash them twice a day, put the entire multiplication-table in their hard little heads, teach them the pleasure of full meals, and of warm beds—would it change the bent of their tastes? Would it revolutionize their ethics? The worst rogue John Blunt knew wore broadcloth, lived in a two-story house, and had a good bank account! Was Mr. Bagges a moral ideal of an inspiring sort?

The central problem was one, not of environment, but of character. Character and environment, no doubt, subtly influence each other; but character is something more than the product of environment. What magic would avail to change a character; to make black white; turn bitter to sweet; lift what was base up to nobility in that most stubborn of all materials, the human soul? John would not admit even to himself the moral bankruptcy of his creed at this point; but from remote and shadowy cells in his own consciousness that ugly fact peeped out.

Still, he would try! Whatever moral virtue there was in clean drains and good plumbing, in soap and scrubbing brushes, should be tried on Angel Court.

He submitted to his committee a proposal to spend part of the funds of the Association in an attempt to sweeten physically some of the foul lanes in the slums. Great was the debate kindled by this proposal; for this 'meant money'; nay, even much money. But, to John Blunt's surprise, Mr. Creakles supported his proposal. He was the treasurer of the Association funds, and had, so far, been singularly unsympathetic towards any proposal to encroach on these for humanitarian purposes. But now he talked another language.

They held their funds, he contended, for the purpose—amongst other things—of 'making experiments in

applied Freethought.' He proposed a resolution, directing that such amounts as were sanctioned by Mr. Gifford and Mr. Blunt, with himself, should be spent from the funds of the Association in carrying out the reformatory work of Freethought. The resolution was carried. Somehow, in the form in which it was recorded in the minute-book, and in the formal notification to the bank, a slight change crept into the wording of the resolution. 'Or' was substituted for 'with'; so that the expenditure was authorized of 'such funds as were sanctioned by Mr. Gifford, the President of the Association, and Mr. Blunt, a member of the committee; *or* by Mr. Creakles, the Treasurer.' A trivial change, slurred over in the reading of the minutes; but destined to have some startling consequences.

CHAPTER XVII

A MODERN MIRACLE

AT the round-table debate Mr. Walton, it will be remembered, had referred to Tom Oxley's 'conversion' as a fact known to everybody, and attested by a changed life. The drunkard had miraculously, and almost at a breath, become sober, the wife-beater gentle! How had this strange miracle been wrought?

Mrs. Oxley had been ill, so ill that it seemed likely, at one time, that she would never get better. Something of the hush and shadow of the grave itself seemed to have fallen on the kitchen, once full of busy-handed and wifely industry. And Tom Oxley was strangely, if temporarily, sobered by the circumstance. A dumb, shy, awkward love for his wife lay hidden somewhere in the cells of his beer-drenched brain; and the sight of her familiar face, made white and unfamiliar with pain, and of the tireless and faithful hands, stretched helpless and idle on the coverlid of the bed, curiously affected him. Moreover, he had, with big, stiff fingers, to attempt many an unaccustomed domestic office.

Then, too, while in this mood, a strange thing had happened. There is a story of a prodigal who had found his evil and disastrous way to a jail-cell, and who was brought there to a mood of repentance by

recognizing on the floor of the passage outside his cell door a bit of matting of the same pattern he had been accustomed to see in the kirk to which his mother used to take him. A thrill of awakened memory took the office of conscience, or made itself the servant of conscience. And a similar stroke of 'God's magic' fell on Tom Oxley. It is certain that conscience is reached by strange roads, and stirs mysteriously at the touch of strange forces. In rummaging in an old cupboard, Oxley came upon a broken work-box, lidless, battered, empty of cottons and needles and tapes. And lo! at the sight, a thrill of unaccustomed feeling ran through his somewhat torpid sensibilities. It was his long-dead mother's box! Many a time had he stood at her knee as she plied the busy needle, the box open at her side, while he, with boyish fingers, explored its recesses.

Forth from the cells of his memory crept a procession of images. His mother's face, patient, and sweet, as, it seemed to him, never any other face had been. There seemed to thrill on his ears again the sound of her hymns, the quiet tones of her voice as she recited to her boy the stories of the Bible. He seemed to feel, soft and ghostly, the touch of her hand on his head. Then there rose the picture of the cottage garden, seen through the open window, with its blowing scents—the garden where, a happy child, he had plucked pink and violet and sweet-william. How far off it all seemed, and yet how near, and real, and vivid! How far he had wandered from the touch of that mother's hand! What a gulf separated him from that innocent boyish figure—himself and yet not himself!

He might doubt God in the abstract, the God of sermons, and of the parsons; but his mother's God——!

He was prepared to darkly suspect, or even vehemently deny, the existence of any general heaven. But there must be a heaven to which his mother had gone; aye—and little Jess! Nay, God and Christ and the Bible all became credible and natural, as he stared at that old work-box. For out of it, as though it were the magic casket of Eastern fable, stole such a procession of visions and memories. Such voices whispered from it, with echoes of old hymns, and Bible tales, and hushed prayers. Did his mother look on him from those pure realms to which she had gone? And, if she did, what must she think of him? So sure was he of that faithful love, that he felt, even in heaven, she must be unhappy to know her boy had grown to be such a man.

Tom Oxley writhed in a quite new self-shame. He had spoiled his mother's heaven! He pictured his mother's eyes gazing at him. And beside her was another figure, that of a little child—his Jess—looking at him, too, with eyes tender, wondering, and sad. Then even these visions faded, and another Face took shape on the tissues of his imagination; a Face of which these others were, somehow, reflections: the white, sad, tender, and awful Face of Christ!

As he sat and pondered on all this, with strange moisture creeping to his unwilling eyelids, the sound of a quick, decided step came down the stairs. It was Mrs. Baxter, the Bible-woman, who, in another moment, stood beside him.

Mrs. Baxter took from her Welsh birth her high cheek-bones, her keen grey eyes, and the odd little thrill—now cooing and dovelike, and now with a stern ring, as of metal, in it—of her voice: a voice which, when charged with her hot but tender spirit, never

failed to affect the hearer curiously ; for Mrs. Baxter could be hot, and hot with spiritual fire that scorched like actual flame. Her Celtic temperament kindled at the sight of cruelty, or idleness, or vice. She was the terror of slatternly wives and of drunken husbands. Her little body would quiver, and her kind grey eyes would flame, as she faced some huge drink-stupefied man, guilty of blackening his wife's eyes.

She was the joy of all children, the angel of all sick beds. For her, Jesus Christ was not only a reality ; He was the only reality. All things else were but shadows ! Every day was rich in answered prayers. The Holy Spirit was just Christ's continued life on earth. Miracles, she believed in ; only they were translated into spiritual terms. Leprous spirits were cleansed by a divine touch ; dead souls were miraculously quickened by a divine breath !

She had nursed Mrs. Oxley back into convalescence ; and now giving up charge of her, meant to discharge her duty by her husband.

'You've a good wife, Tom,' she began ; 'and God has given her back to you again.'

'Aye, Mary has her faults ; but I won't say she isn't good wife enough,' said Tom, with an English husband's native and incurable reluctance to praise the partner of his joys and sorrows.

'She gave her youth and her life to you, Tom,' continued Mrs. Baxter, going with characteristic directness straight to business ; 'and it's an ill return to value her at less than a pint of beer.'

'And who says that I do that ?' demanded Tom, startled into wrath.

'It's true, Tom, though nobody says it. You are selling her happiness for a jug of beer, and bad beer,

too. And you are selling what is more precious than that.'

'And what may that be?' asked Tom, somewhat overwhelmed with the little Welshwoman's fiery rhetoric.

'You are selling Christ and heaven for it.'

'But there is no heaven,' said Tom.

'And how should you know that, my man? But there is! There is! God's Word does not lie. The hope in my own heart does not lie. There is a heaven; and it's meant for you, Tom, and you are meant for it. And you are selling your eternal share in the very city of God for a pint of Sam Fox's beer. You are meant to be Christ's man; and, while God is trying, by the blood of His Son, and the grace of His Spirit, to make a man and a saint of you, you are making yourself a brute. That's a fool's part to play, Tom Oxley.'

'And if I do,' said Oxley, white with wrath, and with curiously twitching lips, 'whose business is it but my own? Nobody is hurt by it but myself.'

'Ah, but everybody is hurt. Your wife is hurt, and the world is hurt, and'—she went on with a hushed, yet thrilling voice—'think of it!—Jesus Christ is hurt! Man, He paid the price of His blood for you; and you cheat Him of His purchase. Judas sold his Master for thirty pieces of silver—and a rope. And you—you sell the Christ who died for you for a bottle of beer. Tom, the devil is getting you over cheaply.'

Tom tried to say that, as he did not believe in a Christ or a devil, all this eloquence was beside the mark. But, somehow, he could not say it. After all, the little Welshwoman was only saying from the out-

side, and saying with irresistible power of conviction, what some voice was always whispering from the inside. And there was a scorching fire in the little woman's eyes, and a ring, half-pitiful, half-wrathful, in her words, that stung poor Tom's conscience with a pain past endurance. He felt himself a scoundrel; and, what was almost worse, he felt sure he was a fool—a fool of the biggest dimensions and of the most brainless sort. And that Figure of the redeeming Christ, betrayed and sold afresh for a drunken bout, seemed to accuse and overwhelm him.

With quick intelligence Mrs. Baxter read the poor fellow's unspoken thought, and her voice and look changed; they grew strangely soft.

'Tom,' she whispered, 'the hand of God's love and power is on you. Don't break from it. As I came down the lane Jim Elder's wife was saying to her bairn: "Jimmie, if you are a naughty boy, mother won't love you." But that's a lie! A mother loves her child, naughty or good. And God's heart is not less tender than a woman's heart, that He made Himself.

"*God, who is rich in mercy,*" she went on to quote, "*for His great love, wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins——*" To love us when we are dead in sins! Oh, Tom, that's good news! God loves you, Tom, here and now. Eh, the wonder of it! The wonder of it!'

Tom sat in silence, his soul shaken with strange forces. Mrs. Baxter's voice fell unheard on his ears. Another Voice—deeper and mightier—was calling out of eternity.

God does His own work in men's souls, and does it in His own way. Poor Oxley's lips were twitching

and trembling with feeling. Suddenly they grew firm with purpose. He was looking straight before him ; but his eyes saw nothing of the homely furniture, the dingy wall on which they looked. He saw, as if painted on the air before him, the Face of the Christ who had redeemed him, and on whom he had repeated the sin of Judas. Down the long-dry channels of his cheeks a few reluctant tears crept ; but Tom knew nothing of them. They fell unheeded.

At last a sudden light kindled in his eyes, the light of a divine resolve, the light of a strangely kindled hope.

'If Jesus Christ can make anything of such a fellow as me,' he whispered, 'He shall have His way.'

'Well, John Blunt,' said Oxley, as they met a few days afterwards, 'I have dropped the White Horse ; and Mary, poor lass, is going to have a better husband than she ever had yet. But, John, no thanks to your Freethought Society ! Man, it makes all vile things easy. It puts oil,' he said, with energy, 'on the steps to hell. Come out of it, John. It taught me I was a beast, and it's easy, then, to live like a beast. It took Christ away from me ; and He's the only One to help a poor fellow up, and keep him up. Yon's poor work, John, thou'rt doing, down in the lecture-hall. To give up Christ for Creakles !'

'Well, well !' said Blunt, 'I'm glad thou'st taken a turn, Oxley, any way. But thou'rt mixing up things. I suppose, though, some do need a Christ,' he added meditatively.

'I do,' said Oxley, with conviction ; 'and, John, I don't think you'll do much without Him.'

Mrs. Oxley's face became, henceforth, as Mr. Walton

called it, one of the 'documents of Christianity.' Peace wrote her divine hieroglyphics upon it; youth crept back to it. Love shone in her eyes, and sang on her lips. Husband and wife began a new life in company.

Mr. Looker met them, walking side by side to church, he grave and she glad.

'Well,' he exclaimed to Mr. Campbell, who was beside him, 'I never thought to see a miracle from the Acts of the Apostles on the pavement of Middleford. I almost mistook the door of the little Methodist chapel for the Beautiful Gate of the Temple.'

'Earth is full of such miracles, thank God,' said Mr. Campbell reverently, 'and the door of any cottage may be the Beautiful Gate of God's Temple.'

CHAPTER XVIII

THEOLOGY IN FLOWERS

KATE ARDEN was walking amongst her flowers in the early summer morning. Clear skies above, the soft-blowing air, the dew-gemmed grass, the lark a mere floating voice high in air, the hedge a tangle of buds, the white flame of the blossoming fruit trees, the red and blue fires of the rich-coloured flowers—all made the simple garden a sort of fairy realm, a cabinet of delights. The magic of the summer air seemed to lighten the trouble that of late had weighed on Kate's heart, and among the clean, pure, soft-scented glories of her garden she moved, herself a human flower, pure and fresh as any rose in it, fragrant as any violet.

A figure, walking with heavy steps and bent head, stopped a moment by the little white gate, and Kate recognized Claude Meares. A singularly frank and loyal friendship united the two; a tie more like that betwixt two frank-hearted schoolboys than betwixt persons of opposite sex. Kate was shocked as she looked at her friend. His face was drawn and colourless. The light of humour—and of that hope without which humour is impossible—had died in his eyes. Weariness was written on every line of his countenance. His dress looked neglected; and there was a haggard

mournfulness of gait and manner which curiously heightened the sadness of his whole appearance.

'Claude,' exclaimed Kate, with shocked pity, 'you are not well.'

'As well as I want to be, Kate,' he replied, with a wan smile.

'Want to be?' she cried.

'Yes, you'll think me a fool, Kate, but I am tired of life. I am tired of the world. I want to get done with everything.'

'Oh, Claude,' was all that Kate could say.

The music of pity in her voice, the look of wide-eyed and startled interest in her face, seemed to unlock the frozen fountains of poor Smears's speech.

'Yes,' he said, 'I have been wandering all night, and with a worse darkness within me than the midnight skies know.'

'And what makes the darkness?' asked Kate.

Kate and Smears had keenly and often debated the new theology which had swept over Middleford; and with Kate as a listener, Smears found no difficulty in going straight to the root of his trouble.

'Well,' he said, 'all my old beliefs have gone. I am bankrupt. And it's the truth that kills me. That's the pity of it! The hard, cruel, dreadful truth. It's an empty world. We are a forgotten race. If there is a God at all, He is a God of stone and ice; and He is farther off than the stars.'

'That's your new secular gospel,' replied Kate, with energy.

'Yes,' he said, 'and it is all the gospel that is left. And, curiously enough, some of them welcome it as a gospel of sunshine. It makes the world brighter for Cecil. Mr. Creakles chuckles over it. Mr. Gifford

believes it is going to regenerate the race. But though, like the rest of them, I believe it, yet I *hate* it. It kills me.'

'And if it were true, it might well kill you and me, and all the world. But oh, Smears,' she went on, dropping into the more homely sobriquet in her earnestness, 'it is not true! You are tricked. Why, God is all about us.'

'Ah, that is the Bible,' said Smears, 'but——'; and the sadness of his smile stabbed Kate's heart like a sword.

'He is not behind the stars. He is here,' and Kate put her hand on her breast.

'Yes, that's your simple, girlish fancy.'

"Fancy?" Oh, Claude! He is the most certain of realities.'

'Ah, that's a dream.'

'Smears,' said Kate, trying with a woman's quick wit to strike some chord of agreement, 'you used to have eyes for the meaning of things. Why, everything about you rebukes your dreadful doubt. Look at that patch of simple grass, with dewdrops on the points of all the soft, slender, innumerable spears. Look, Smears! It is like a square of rich green lace sprinkled with diamonds. It is a jewelled carpet, spread for man's poor feet. And,' she went on, with a thrilling drop in her voice, 'there's a thought of God at the root of every blade of that grass; a thought of God in every shining dewdrop. Why, here *is* God, before your very eyes, and this is His garden.'

'Ah, you are trying to touch the artist in me; but art is dead. My new theology has killed it. You are the artist, Kate. But your art tricks you as badly as what you call your theology. If you must idealize

the dewdrops, why not call them tears that have fallen from the sorrowful eyelids of the night on the sadness of the earth? But all this is to play pretty tricks with words.'

'Yet, look,' said Kate, 'how, when the sun comes over the hill, your "tears" are transfigured into jewels at the touch of the slanting sunbeams! Isn't that one of Nature's parables? It seems to me like a prophecy, written in living letters on the green parchment of the grass, that, when God's morning dawns, all human tears will be transfigured into jewels to shine for ever.'

'Those are pretty words; but you must come out of the realm of imagination, Kate,' replied Smears, with a bitter smile. 'Your dewdrops, as a matter of scientific fact, are the wandering night vapour condensed by the chill of the earth. Your "jewels" are bred of mere night and cold.'

'But,' said Kate softly, 'how divine is the power—and how yet more divine is the purpose—which, from such poor things—from thin air and cold moisture—evolves the wonder of that jewelled grass, and so makes a little patch of commonplace meadow a sort of Field of Cloth of Gold! Ah, Smears, your science doesn't go far enough.'

'It goes as far as the facts; and science can go no farther, and can stop no sooner.'

'I'm little better than an untaught girl, and it's folly of me to talk about science. But,' Kate persisted earnestly, 'matter can't be everything. We know it isn't. When a mother kisses her infant's cheek, is there nothing there but the pluck of a given set of muscles, and the contact of two little patches of living tissue? There is the brain behind the muscles,

> | and the thought in the brain ; and then there is the mother's heart behind both. Science takes no account of the love in the mother's kiss ; yet is not that a fact, too ? Isn't it the supreme fact ? And behind the vapour of the night, and the chill of the earth, which give us the wonder of the dew, isn't there a divine love that intends it ; that makes the frontiers of heat and cold, of dry and wet, a fringe of glories ?'

'And so you would really find God's handwriting—His signature—in a grass-plot ?'

'Yes,' said Kate, with energy. 'Why, for me earth itself often seems like heaven. As I walked along this path this morning,' she went on, trying to strike some note, if only of artistic sympathy, in Smears's mind, 'the soft air, the great, peaceful sky, the gladness of the birds, the rejoicing earth, seemed so to reflect the mind of the great Maker that I felt the tears gather in my eyes with mere joy. Smears, who bids the glory of the rose suddenly break out from the brown earth and invisible air ? It is God ! And it reveals God ! I almost felt as if this corner of my garden was a dim little chamber in heaven. Perhaps it is—if we could only see all it holds ! If a troop of angels had suddenly begun singing in the sky it would have seemed natural. Perhaps the birds are His singing angels. Oh, how near God and heaven are !'

'God "near" ?' said Smears ; 'why, the whole span of the dreadful, immeasurable universe parts Him from us. What does the sun know of the atoms which live and die in its beams ? No, Kate ; I didn't know you were such a poet ! But I must stick to the dreadful prose of facts. The universe is too big in

scale to make your gospel credible ; and God—if there is a God—is on the outside of it. All the millions of shining, uncomprehended worlds are betwixt Him and us. God has the stars to look after, and not the blades of grass, and we are less even than the grass.'

'But He does both,' persisted Kate. 'Smears,' she went on, borrowing, unconsciously, the little Bible-woman's argument, 'your mistake is that you make God, not too great, but too little.'

'Too little?'

'Yes ; you think that He can guide the stars on their courses, but can't count the blades of grass, or see when a sparrow falls. He isn't big enough to attend to both ! If the telescope shows how wide God's universe is, doesn't the microscope show how completely He fills it ? But you need not take your theology from either telescope or miscroscope, for they can only show God's work, not God Himself. Oh, Smears ! Think of Christ and His love, and His sorrows, and the blood He shed for us !'

'Ah, Kate, if *that* were true——'

'But it *is* true ! The God who made the stars is also the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. That is the gospel, and that it's true I feel in every drop of my blood !'

Smears smiled sadly.

'Think of your favourite Tennyson, over whom we used to dispute, Kate. He tells you what the worth of human life is.

'A life of nothings, nothing worth,
From that first nothing ere his birth
To that last nothing under earth.

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High up the vapours fold and swim,
About him broods the twilight dim,
The place he knew forgetteth him.'

Kate knew her Tennyson by heart, and she broke in eagerly: 'Ah! that is the wrong Voice. You forget how the poet at last awakes, and how his poem ends:

'I ceased and sat as one forlorn,
Then said the Voice in quiet scorn,
"Behold, it is the Sabbath morn."

Like softened airs that blowing, steal.
When meres begin to uncongeal,
The sweet church bells began to peal.

So heavenly-toned that in that hour,
From out my sullen heart a power
Broke, like the rainbow from the shower.

To feel, although no tongue can prove,
That every cloud that spreads above
And veileth Love, itself is love.'

Kate's voice ran like some silver fugue through the verses, but Smears remained unmoved.

'I don't take my theology from Tennyson,' he said doggedly. 'My eyes, and the plain facts of the universe, shape my creed. The tenderness of your nature, Kate, may make some greater love somewhere else credible to you. But, then, you are not Mr. Creakles; still less are you Mr. Bagges. As I look at them any divine Maker and Lover becomes incredible. Now, Kate, if *you* were God——'

'Oh, Smears,' she exclaimed sadly.

'But when I look at the irony of things in this world—the sorrow, the confusion, the tragedy—it seems

to me just such a world as Mr. Creakles, if he were endowed with omnipotence, might create. No, Kate, the water is too deep for our poor feet.'

Kate looked at him pitifully.

'Smears,' she said softly, 'I am only a girl, with a girl's foolish thoughts; but go to Professor Gardner. He is a scholar. Or,' she added, with a note of deeper confidence, 'go to Mr. Walton. He is a saint!'

'Perhaps I may, Kate,' he replied wearily, as he moved, with tired feet, away. 'But all desire is killed for me. Nor scholar nor saint can help me.'

On that same day Mr. Creakles's somewhat dingy office witnessed a curious interview. Cecil sat in it, with gloomy brow and twitching lips, while Mr. Creakles himself wriggled restlessly in his chair opposite him, looking even more like a trapped fox than was usual with him. The pair had been hit badly in a Stock Exchange gamble, run with bank money, and in which Mr. Arden himself had an unacknowledged interest. In part the cash was provided in the disguise of an overdraft to Mr. Creakles; in part Cecil 'borrowed' it from the depleted shelves of the cash safe under his care.

Men are apt to play subtly silly tricks with their conscience. Mr. Creakles probably knew he was a rogue, and was untroubled by the circumstance. But Mr. Arden and Cecil wrapped themselves in ingenious illusions. An overdraft was legitimate; and Mr. Arden diligently avoided any recollection of the fact that there was a fraud at the bottom of the overdraft. As for Cecil, he was only 'using' capital which the bank suffered most wastefully to lie inert. But fortune had proved cruel, and bank cash to the amount of

some thousands of pounds had vanished in thin air. The depleted bank-safe was mute and fatal witness against its own guardians.

Cecil, at that moment, saw before him an air-drawn picture of discovery, ruin, shame. He seemed to feel on his limbs the yellow garb of a convict. The free and cheerful world narrowed to a jail-cell. A thrill of shuddering terror ran through his blood.

'The inspector's due next week,' he said, 'and it must all come out.'

He glanced despairingly at Mr. Creakles, who sat, with lowering brow, fiercely gnawing his short and not too clean nails till a faint red stain of blood was on one spot of his bristly moustache.

'Creakles,' said Cecil savagely, 'you've brought us into this mess. Get us out of it!'

Mr. Creakles was still silent, with unheeding ears. He was fishing in the unclean depths of his memory for some evil expedient which would serve them.

'We can't cover up the missing cash,' said Cecil.

'No,' said Mr. Creakles, without looking up, 'but you might draw a red-herring across it.'

Cecil looked at him eagerly. There was a curious, indefinable change in Mr. Creakles's face. The lips were pendulous, but the eyes were fierce, the self-complacent smirk was gone, and in the altered lines of his face there was a new expression. It was the face of a criminal, remembering a criminal act, or meditating one; and Cecil stared at its owner, recognizing the change, but only half realizing its meaning.

'Could you get me,' said Creakles, with a curious hesitation, 'an impression of the key of the manager's

safe? And that window opening on the lane—could you leave it unbolted—or loosen the screws that hold the bolt?’

‘What on earth do you mean?’ said Cecil, aghast. ‘Are you putting up a burglary?’

‘No; and no one would attempt the strong-room; but if there was a sham robbery—or a robbery of some sort—anywhere about the bank—that might serve to cover up the cash we’ve lost.’

The two men looked at each other, Creakles as though to explore his companion’s thoughts, Cecil as if frozen with terror at the vision of another crime—a crime of a very perilous and naked sort.

‘I think,’ said Creakles hesitatingly and watching the other’s face, ‘I think I could put my hands on a couple of fellows who would do the job, if it was made safe for them. Of course we’d have to pay them, but they could be trusted.’

The two guilty heads stooped to each other, and a long whispered colloquy followed.

Half an hour afterwards Cecil walked out into the street, and took his way to the bank. His face, too, had curiously altered. He had, for the first time, looked openly at crime, and had consented to it. That is an experience which subtly transfigures, to a new and evil pattern, the very countenance of its subject. Something had gone from Cecil’s face; something new and evil had crept into it. There was a furtive look in his eyes, a hunted expression in his very features. The constable at the street corner gazed at him carelessly, and then took a second and keener look. What was it in the clear-cut, handsome face that, somehow, gave the constable a sense of professional interest? It was crime peeping

out unconsciously, and the constable followed with his eyes Cecil's figure, without knowing why he did it.

Mr. Creakles ran up that night to London. It was 'business,' he said, that took him there. But it was 'business' that led him into strange regions and very queer company. How did the secretary of the Freethought Association, and the manager of the Middleford People's Building Society, come to possess such an intimate acquaintance with the worst dens in London, and its most dangerous criminals?

CHAPTER XIX

THE WRECK

IT was holiday time in Middleford, and the great pleasure trip to Slate Island—which had grown into an annual institution—was just starting. The trip was a run of nearly thirty miles, down the tiny harbour across the narrow strait through which the tides raced and swung in alternate currents, with a speed that sometimes rose to fury; then through a tangle of rocks to where Slate Island lifted its grey and splintered peak against the skyline. In fine weather the trip was beautiful; in foul it was apt to be risky. But Slate Island was a great attraction. Visitors came from far to see it, when the summer seas were singing softly about it. On its western cliffs the great Atlantic breakers, rolling in from measureless leagues of sea-space, broke with tireless fury.

The great cliff-walls looking seaward were fretted with caves, into which the breakers flung themselves with tireless energy; so that, when the huge waves swung back in reflux, the whole face of the cliff streamed with cataracts of sea-foam. On the eastern and sheltered side the island ran down with a gentle slope into calmer water, where landing was easy. More than one slender stream leaped in fairy cataracts down the eastern

flank of the great parapet of tilted strata which formed the crowning ridge of the little island.

Three steamers, carrying the pleasure-seekers, went splashing off, with loud clang of bands and gay flutter of bunting. The Freethought Association, amongst other societies, was largely represented in the crowd. John Blunt was there, and Cecil ; Kit Somers, too, was there. He was in no holiday mood, it is true ; but, as he reflected, Kate might be there ; and at the mere imagination his feet carried him off in the direction of the pier, without waiting for any instructions from his brain, and not till the boat started did he find, alas ! that Kate was not in the crowd.

The three hours' run to Slate Island went pleasantly enough, save when the boats rolled and swung to the sliding tides across the straits. The scene on the island was merry. The grey slope of the great ridge was flecked with white dresses and climbing figures. The sound of happy voices and light laughter floated down from the hill-crest to the sea-shore, with elfin-like effect. But Kit wandered with a heavy heart amongst the merry groups.

Soon after noon a low bank of clouds began to darken in the south-west. Grey fog was apt to drift over sea and land when the wind blew from that quarter ; and, following hard on the fog, and driving it in ragged patches before it, would come a sharp gale. The face of Captain Sill, the grizzle-bearded commodore of the little pleasure-squadron, grew anxious as he watched the grey bank to the south-west steadily darken and climb up the sky. They must begin the homeward run earlier than had been arranged. At three o'clock, instead of five, the steam-whistle blew shrill and long from his boat. But the pleasure-seekers

came down the slopes with exasperating deliberation. Stray couples still loitered in the ravines. Their land-bred senses could discover no reason for haste.

The first boat at last got itself loaded, and moved off. By the time the second was ready to start a haze had drifted over the waters, chilling the air and narrowing the horizon. The third boat lingered, with orders to collect the last loitering couples, whistling furiously to hurry their too-leisurely steps. The process was long; but at length the last pair was on board, the moorings were thrown off, and the boat started on the homeward run.

Round the southern shoulder of the island the fog by this time was blowing in masses of torn, white vapour. Each splintered islet the boat ran past was edged with spray. The voice of the sea took a sighing note. So quickly the sky seemed to darken, so keenly and shrill sang the wind, so low sank the gale-torn clouds, that it was plain the homeward run would be one of discomfort. As the boat moved out of the shelter of Slate Island she took the rising wind on her beam, and heeled over to it heavily. On the bridge the captain looked anxiously to windward, and swore softly under his breath at the careless holiday-makers who had detained him so long. The prospect of a run across the tangled dance of tides and currents, all sown with rocks, through flying fog, quick-coming darkness, and a shrilling gale, was not cheerful.

The course to Slate Island was a mere pleasure track, used only in summer. No friendly light shone on any rocky point, till 'the straits' were reached, when a light on a jutting headland, known as 'The Splinters,' marked the entrance to the sheltered inlet which ran up to

Middleford. The captain was eager to catch the gleam of that light before the fast-coming night shrouded sea and islands with utter darkness, and he drove ahead full speed.

Steadily the clouds seemed to thicken ; a furious rain-storm came driving up from the south-west. It scourged the brown islands, the darkening sea, and the slanting deck of the steamer with ice-cold rain, and swept away to leeward. Squall after squall followed, and night came with them. The headlands grew ghostly and vague. The boat was now in shelter, as it ran to leeward of some half-seen mass of rock ; and now, as it passed from under the friendly lee, and caught the hurrying south-wester, it lay over, with its gunwale almost under water. A pleasure-boat, caught by such a gale, at such an hour, and in such waters, was apt to fare badly. But the captain, through whose nerves there still ran a note of temper against the loiterers who had detained him so long, drove ahead.

‘Serve the fools right,’ he said to himself grimly, as he looked down on the wet decks, where some unhappy couples—who found the crowd and heat of the little saloon too trying—lay prostrate in the throes of seasickness.

Two-thirds of the distance had now been run. Round the next headland the light on The Splinters would become visible. Just then a heavier sea than usual struck the boat. Her bow rose high in air, while the spray flew wildly up over bridge and funnel. Deep, again, in the gulf betwixt two waves, sank the ship’s bows, her stern jerked high in the darkness, the screw racing furiously. Another great sea struck the boat on the beam, and the dripping bows rose still higher, and sank again, in turn, still deeper. As the stern lifted

suddenly, answering the plunge of the bows, there was one wild jerk, and then the furiously racing screw suddenly ceased to shake the boat. The shaft had snapped! The head of the boat swung off to leeward; and in a moment the steamer was drifting helplessly as a log with the racing waves.

So violent at the moment was the sea, so narrow the space that parted the true track from the rocks to leeward, edged with far-jutting reefs, that almost at a breath the crisis came. The captain was calling out his orders sternly and coolly from the bridge. The mate, with a cluster of hands, was busy in preparation for letting go the anchor.

‘All ready, sir,’ he yelled back to the bridge.

‘Let go,’ came the order.

The anchor plunged into the sea, the cable rattled fiercely through the hawse-hole. The check of the cable brought the head of the boat up in the teeth of the sea, and the hull swung with a deadly lurch to leeward. At that moment a huge wave struck the boat, the spray blew angrily across the decks, and the hull rose high as the great body of the wave swept beneath it. As it sank there came a crash; the ship shook from stem to stern. The wave had flung it on the jagged flank of a reef!

In a moment the wet and slanting deck was a tumult of crying and terrified passengers. As they burst from the crowded saloon, with its close air and shining lights, the terrified wretches found themselves set suddenly face to face with peril in its blackest shape.

The night had taken a new darkness. And, out of night and space, the black waves came riding in on the shaking hull. The very air was full of wind-driven spray; the strangling waters broke with pitiless force

across the deck, and many passengers were instantly swept away into the furious sea to leeward.

Death is, in one sense, the final touchstone of character. Life, it is true, searches character subtly ; but death is a test of rougher, more sudden, and peremptory sort. At its coming, all the paper screens of conventional beliefs, all the easy habitudes of ordinary life, vanish. What may be called the secondary motives, which govern human conduct, perish like straws in flame. The great primitive emotions emerge. How few and rare are the spiritual forces which can keep steady the human soul in the shock and swoon of death !

It was curious to note how diversely the actors bore themselves on that sea-whipped stage. Any strong affection seemed to put the soul in which it dwelt beyond the reach of terror, even under the challenge of that terrifying scene. Thus, a white-faced woman, bare-headed, her gay dress clinging like a wet rag to her figure, her hair blown about her face by the wind, clasped hard to her breast a crying child. The keen spray smote her as with the lash of a whip. One of the boats was already launched, and rose and sank wildly to leeward ; now lifted suddenly out of the darkness, showing a dozen faces pale and wild in the flare of the deck-lights, and now sinking into the darkness as though swallowed up by it.

The woman stood by the broken bulwarks. As the boat rose into sight again, she realized that here was a chance for her child. She held it out in her arms, and screamed in thrilling accents :

‘Take her ! Save her ! Oh, save her !’

There was no thought of self. Love mastered all other emotions. All that shaken figure knew was a

passion of agonized concern for the little child in her arms.

A working man kissed his wife. 'The blood of Jesus Christ,' he said, 'cleanses from all sin,' and he swung her off the bulwark into the uplifted arms of a sailor, standing on a seat of the boat. It was a watchword and a farewell.

On the bridge stood the captain; now silent, with bent head and listening air, as he felt the ship quiver to the shock of the assailing waves; now leaning forward to shout some stern, brief order to the men at the boats. The sense of duty, the pride of his calling, the habitudes and traditions of a lifetime, kept him cool. He must 'stick by his ship.' He must see his passengers safe. He must not save himself while a single life in his charge was in peril.

Meanwhile, on the deck, panic reigned. Its accents grew ever shriller. The ship was lost. Fear was unashamed. In some of the unhappy passengers it rose to the fervours of a lunacy. They were passing the women down to one of the boats when the sorely tormented hull shook afresh, to the stroke of a sea of greater fury than the rest. A cry suddenly went up, 'Into the boats!' and a general rush was made to the gap in the bulwarks. The chief officer, a cool, brave seaman, faced the crowd, striking right and left.

'Be men!' he cried. 'Keep your heads! Let the women go first.'

But the rush overbore him. He was thrust backward till he fell over the broken bulwark, and disappeared in the sea. The boat rose into the glare of the deck-lights, lifted high by a great wave, and a dozen of

the terrified passengers leaped for it. Some missed it. One struck the edge of the boat with his head, and sank without a sound. But more than half a dozen reached the boat in the wild leap, and the shock was fatal. The boat heeled heavily over till the eddying sea broke over her thwarts. She sank ; a dozen struggling figures were visible for a moment on the black waters ; then they were swept away like wisps of seaweed.

Further aft, the quarter-boat had a happier fate. She had swung clear, and been lowered safely. The group waiting to embark in her was smaller than that forward, and woman after woman amongst the passengers was handed down safely. Then the men followed. But the boat, by this time, was crowded.

‘One more ! Room for one more,’ shouted a sailor who, swaying with the wildly swaying boat, looked up—his face wet with spray, and white in the light of the flaring deck-lights.

‘Only one !’ And a group of five or six clung to the bulwarks, waiting to embark ! At this moment, a shivering and weeping girl was discovered, crouched under the bulwarks. Kit grasped the little figure, and lifted it high in his strong arms over the bulwarks.

‘Pass the girl,’ cried the sailor, from the boat.

But a rough deck-hand, with an oath, shouted, ‘Every man for himself !’ and, putting his foot on the bulwark, he leaped for the boat. As he leaped, his head was struck with the swinging block of the davit, and he fell like a stone into the sea.

All this passed, so to speak, in a breath. And the shout of the man, his brutal oath, his wild leap, seemed

to let loose all the elemental passions amongst the group yet on the deck. They fought, and struggled, and swore, striving to reach the gangway, whence they could leap into the boat. Two or three slipped, or were thrust, overboard, and vanished. From the boat, John Blunt looked up and watched that grim drama. He caught a glimpse of Kit's face. It seemed lit up with some strange fire. He still held the girl in his arms, and, leaning forward, cried :

‘Take the girl! We men can die.’

When the crash of the striking ship drew him, in the rush of the other passengers, to the deck, Kit had found himself caught in a crowd of panic-stricken men and crying women. There is a deadly infection in the terrors of a crowd, and Kit felt himself, for a moment swept away by it. Every natural human instinct impelled him to make a struggle for his own life in the mad fashion of the rest. But nobler forces almost at a breath asserted themselves. The words of an old Psalm seemed to syllable themselves, without volition or memory of his own, in his brain :

‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed ; and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea ; though the waves thereof roar and be troubled.’

Then, in Kit's heart, awoke another impulse. He heard men pray, and saw women weep ; and the primary, essential passion of Christianity, pity, took possession of him. He must help others. He found himself comforting one passionately sobbing woman.

‘Christ is here,’ he said. ‘He will take care of your child.’

Some strange faculty of utterance awoke in him.

He found on his lips words with fire, and authority in them, which acted like a tonic on trembling men and despairing women. He discovered, as we have described, a weeping, forgotten child, crouching under the bulwarks, and sobbing unheeded ; and, catching her up in his arms, he leaned far over the bulwarks, to pass her down to the boat. Then came the leap of the deck-hand ; and, like some mad, swift drama, the rush to the boat. This, too, passed. The sailor had caught the little girl, and passed her aft in the boat. Then, looking up, he shouted to Kit, 'Jump quick !'

One bent old figure, still clinging, with chattering teeth and shaking hands, to the bulwark, caught Kit's eye. The white hair was blown about the old man's face ; his crouching attitude prevented him from being seen sooner. Kit looked at him. All the pulses of his young blood were tingling with energy for the leap. But the sight of that bent and pitiful figure arrested him.

'Now's your chance,' cried the sailor impatiently, as the boat once more was flung up by the sea.

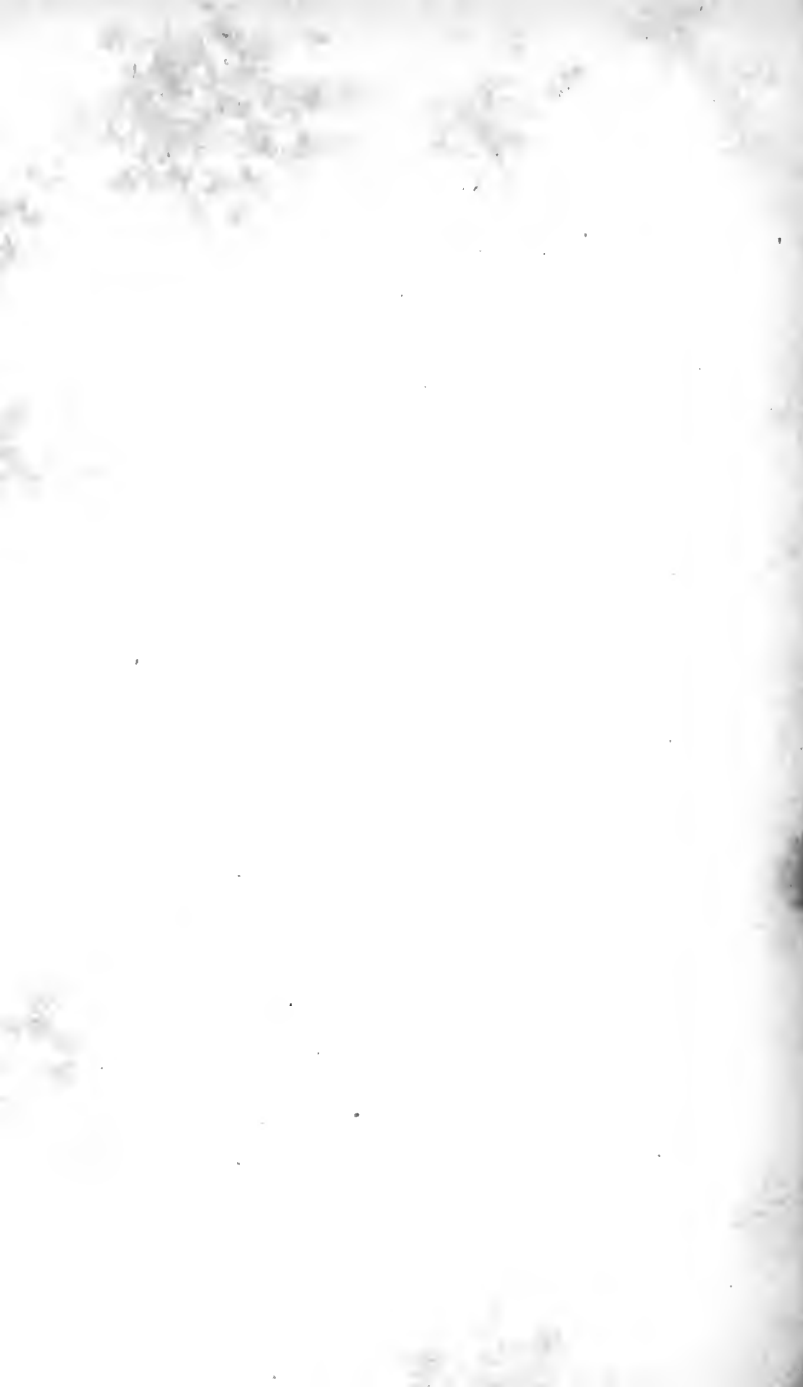
'Come on, old fellow,' Kit cried, 'here's *your* chance,' and he stepped back and drew the tottering figure to the edge of the gangway.

At that moment another person struggled to the bulwark. It was Cecil. A wave had flung him down and half-stunned him, and he had crouched under the bulwarks while the fight for the boat had raged. Now he struggled up out of the strangling water, and saw the boat, with its freight of black figures and white, upturned faces. That way lay escape ; or, at least, a chance of escape.

To say that Cecil was a coward would be untrue ; but



HE PUT HIS STRONG HAND ON THE OLD MAN'S
SHOULDER AND PUSHED HIM FIERCELY BACK.



courage is of many sorts. If he had been a soldier, pride in his flag, the passion of combat, the dread of dishonour, would have made him play a gallant part. If peril had faced him in the open day, and there had been a crowd to watch how he bore himself, and to applaud a fine act, Cecil could have played the man. But here was the wild night, the black sea, the shrieking wind. Life was sweet, and death, he believed, meant annihilation. All the forces bred of faith, or born of duty, were gone. Why should he throw away his life—the only life he had—merely to give that unknown old man a doubtful chance of surviving? Life, for Cecil, was much more than it could be for him! He had had his day. There was no ‘duty’ in the matter, for duty had lost its authority. There was no glitter of heroism. Shame had no sting where there was no crowd to see.

Thought is swift in such a crisis. When we stand with death at the touch, we think in leaps of lightning. All the reasoning we are trying to describe ran in a flash of fire through Cecil’s brain. The cold night, the cruel wind, the clamour of the waves, the atmosphere of panic—all seemed to quench every passion save that of pure selfishness; and in Cecil’s mind that mood became, in an instant, supreme. The baser passions triumphed. They did not seem ‘base,’ but only natural.

He put his strong hand on the old man’s shoulder, and plucked him fiercely back. Those in the boat could not see the act. They only saw the white head suddenly disappear. John Blunt, alone, as it happened, caught a momentary glimpse of the scene. Then Cecil leaped. The shock of his leap threw the sailor off his balance, and he fell into the sea.

‘Push off,’ cried Cecil, ‘she is breaking up.’

With a splash the eager oars fell into the water, and the boat went with a wild swing to leeward. At that moment John Blunt looked up from the crowd in the boat, towards the wreck. Kit Somers leaned, with folded arms, on the bulwarks, looking steadily towards the vanishing boat. He suddenly threw up his hand, with a gesture of farewell; a smile seemed to light up his face. Then the blackness swallowed him up.

All that night, through foam and storm, the boat struggled on, admirably steered by the third mate. When dawn broke, a fishing-smack, leaning to the gale, like a gull, with slanting wings, but coming almost with the flight of a seagull, bore down, and the bedraggled and half-frozen figures were taken on board.

As they landed on the pier John Blunt and Cecil, for a moment, stood face to face. Cecil knew, by some swift and sure instinct, that he was judged and condemned by his companion, and he resented it—resented the reproach of his silent lips, and the challenge of his accusing eyes.

'Man, Cecil!' said John at last, 'I had rather seen you dead than seen you strike down that poor old man.'

'But it was every man for himself,' answered Cecil defiantly, 'and my life was worth more than his; more to me and more to the world, too. Why should I have sacrificed myself for him?'

Somehow, there came to John Blunt's mind an old verse, '*He saved others; Himself He cannot save.*' The words seemed to speak out of a world of moral ideals far off, fast fading, yet infinitely noble and infinitely sweet. Cecil had turned away in anger, but

John stood meditatively. He still seemed to see the two figures of Cecil and Kit painted on the canvas of the darkness. Death stood behind them. The furious sea was leaping at them. Betwixt them was an old, white-headed man, his very helplessness a challenge, a test of character, to each of the two young men. And John Blunt remembered how Kit stepped back and gave the chance of life to the frail old man, while Cecil struck him down, to secure a chance of escape for himself.

Was each the representative of his system? Christianity taught self-sacrifice; Freethought believed in the survival of the fittest, and in the right of the 'fittest'—that is, of the strongest—to survive. Why not? Cecil's life was worth more to the world than that of the trembling and white-haired figure he had thrust aside. Yet John's heart, in spite of himself, condemned Cecil, and condemned the theory which would excuse him. His creed, he felt uncomfortably, had no place for self-sacrifice in its ethics.

Cecil himself, as he sat at night in his room, tried to forget the scene; but it rose to his imagination again and again, and yet again. He acted it over a score of times. He refused to blame himself. What debt did he owe to this stranger—nameless, old, his life at its dregs? Why should he have given up his chance of existence to him? It was true that Kit did this; but it was quixotic; it was absurd.

Suppose, at that moment, he had been drifting a strangled corpse in the sea-depths, what compensation for the warm, rich life he had lost would it have been to remember that he had been 'unselfish,' 'heroic'? Nay, he would be past remembering anything—even his own 'heroism'! He must be practical, and

live, not by his old faith, but by his new and better one.

Yet he felt, somehow, that he had sustained some subtle moral loss in that scene on the deck. He was a worse man for it! And Kit was nobler!

CHAPTER XX

NIGHT AND SEA

KIT still leaned on the bulwark of the stranded ship. The darkness was full of the flying spray, and the scuffling and furious wind. The deck under his feet trembled continually to the stroke of the waves. He was alone. There might be others, crouching for shelter, and waiting for death elsewhere on the wave-swept deck; but the darkness hid them. The old man had vanished—how, Kit knew not. Every light was quenched. The waves raced at will through the daintily furnished saloon; the boat was settling down more heavily under the incessant leap of the waves.

Yet, curiously enough, Kit was conscious for the moment neither of loneliness nor of fear. The sense of a Divine Presence thrilled him. It preoccupied every sense. It filled the darkness; it sang within the tumult of the storm. The great elemental forces raging about him seemed tamed and harmless in that Presence. Kit felt—he knew not why nor how—that he belonged to another order, which their rage could not touch. So the pulses of his blood were steady, his senses quick, his imagination unterrified. He was waiting for a crisis; but waiting without fear, and with a strange and inexpressible exaltation—through which ran a certain fire of curiosity—in his mood.

Suddenly the crisis was upon him. Under the raving of the winds, and the tumult of the sea, there ran—and beneath his very feet—a crash of splintering timber, of rending metal. The boat was breaking amidships! At that moment a vast wave was riding in on the wreck, its crest looming with a mountainous effect in the darkness.

Kit realized that to be caught in the whirl of broken timbers would be fatal; and with quick decision he caught, in the oncoming wave, a chance of escape. As its foam swirled and sang about him, and before the actual weight of the mighty sea tumbled on him, he flung himself on to the lower slopes of the wave, and, with the stroke of a swift and strong swimmer, went riding off with it, above the crest of the reef, and beyond the whirling *débris* of the destroyed vessel.

How far the great wave seemed to run! At last its crest began to sink. The reflux was deep and fierce. Kit sank with it and was caught in its resistless sweep. A fine swimmer, cool and strong, yet he was helpless as a bit of drifting seaweed in the backward swing of the wave. Presently another great billow—a liquid Alps; a mountain range of black water travelling with the speed of a railway train—lifted him on its huge flank and bore him onward. Then, as he flung his hand forward in a swimmer's stroke, it struck the fragment of a spar.

From an iron ring which bound the spar two massive eyelet holes projected, and from these streamed the fragments of a broken stay. Kit clutched this, and found the spar carried him buoyantly. He held desperately on by the tangled ropes, pushed himself free from the spar when it rolled dangerously on him

and so sank and rose as the great billows raced past him, or fell under him. How far and how long he drifted he could not tell. Sometimes he was only semi-conscious beneath the incessant lash of the flying scud.

At last he heard ahead of him the deeper sound of breakers—the angry crash of the rushing waters as they flung themselves on rocks. The sound roused him, with its sullen challenge. If he were to be flung on the reef, his soft flesh, he knew, would be torn, almost at a breath, into bloody fragments on its hundred cruel points.

He felt himself swept forward by the lifting breaker with almost dizzy speed. Then the wave began to sink. Would the soft water turn, in another moment, into the receding edges of the reef? As it happened, he was flung on the reef just where a mighty growth of seaweed, a vast stretch of elastic gutta-percha-like fronds, clothed it, and padded it into harmlessness. The long, strap-like fronds streamed out in the line of the rushing wave, and Kit found himself swept over them as over some elastic carpet.

Presently the wave came swinging back, in mighty reflux. Kit grasped the tough and ribbon-like fronds, and held to them desperately. The seaward-rushing waters blinded and almost strangled him. He felt as if his arms must be torn from his shoulder-blades. But he held on stubbornly, burying his face in the sea-fronds. At last the pressure began to lighten, the rush of the wave faltered. Kit turned on his back and looked seaward. Against the black sky there was visible a mass of deeper black, cliff-like in height and shape; a moving wall coming swiftly on, and climbing higher as it came.

It was another great breaker, and it swept him away like a chip. Presently he felt under his hands again the smooth, tough fronds of the kindly seaweed, and he clutched them. He was crushed and flattened against the reef. The great bed of seaweed still acted as an elastic carpet, but it seemed as if the weight and roar of strangling waters above him would never cease. He was choking, dying. Then the wave swept backward ; its weight grew less cruel. It was past.

Gasping, and well-nigh drowned, Kit lifted his head, and felt the keen salt air rush into his lungs. Another such wave would kill him. But he now felt the solid reef, still masked with seaweed, under his feet, and he struggled forward and upward for a few yards. Once more he heard behind him the roar of the coming water. It was on him ; it pressed him almost to the point of unconsciousness. Yet he held on, and struggled and fought his desperate way up. Now the swinging waves rose no higher than his shoulders ; then his arms were clear ; at last, shaken, bruised, giddy, he felt the rough, prickly grass about his feet, and realized that he was beyond the reach of even those cruel and pursuing waters.

He fell on the grass, which seemed warm to his chilled flesh, and his blood crept, with tingling pain, through all his limbs. He lay for some hours, half-swooning, half-sleeping. At last he was conscious that the wind had grown less violent ; the roar of the sea took a softer note. The stars shone keen and cold through the flying clouds ; he fell into deep and dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, a soft haze was stealing up from the eastern horizon. It deepened ; it flushed into rose ; it kindled into flame. The day was dawning. Great

bars of light from the unrisen sun shot upward to the zenith like the spokes of some titanic and shining wheel. The sea stretched, like a mottled floor, grey and cold under the morning sky, except where, to the east, the curve of sea-line seemed to borrow fire from the fiery red of the dawn.

Kit stood up and turned his face towards the glory of the east. It was as though he stood before some altar-flame. The open gates of heaven seemed to burn before him. With a rush, all the memories of the night swept over him. Death had touched him, chilled him with its icy breath. But it had passed by him! He lived, and life was sweet! But something sweeter than life itself seemed to burn in his blood. He had struggled not only out of the dark floods of the salt sea, but out of a darker sea of doubts, or of half-beliefs. He seemed to himself to have fought with great elemental forces, with tempest and darkness and sea—and with a Shadow behind them all, and mightier than them all, one to which they were but servants—the ‘shadow feared of man.’ And faith had given him victory! His Master was their Master. Here was a shining and luminous memory, to last a lifetime.

There are strange and unguessed reserves in religion. In calm days and commonplace experiences it seems tame and commonplace. But at the challenge of fear and death it becomes a supernatural force. Kit had found it to be mightier than the fear of death. It kindled by its mere breath a flame of courage such as burned from no earthly fire. An exultant note of certainty and of triumph sang like the music of some strange psalm in Kit’s heart.

Yes, death was abolished! Its dark sceptre was broken. Its power to shake the human heart was

destroyed. Christ had stood beside him on the wave-swept deck, and in the terror-filled darkness; and in that Presence fear had vanished. '*He that keepeth My words shall not see death.*' Kit had stood face to face with death, and the mighty Shadow had faded and passed like a wreath of vapour. He lifted his hands:

'O God,' he cried, 'Lord of sea and land, Master of life and death: there is no death where Thou art, and to the souls that trust in Thee.'

He was faint, hungry, bruised, half-naked, alone. But he turned to the waste sea and wild rocks, and smiled on them. They could not hurt him. Their Maker and Master was his Saviour.

But then came back the empire of familiar human things.

Kit knew that, as the sea fell, and the gale blew itself out, the boats from the inlet would come in search of possible survivors of the wreck, and of the bodies of the drowned. But he was far to leeward of the wreck. He might wait for many hours—perhaps another night—before he was rescued. Why should he wait? He was conscious of a curious elation and confidence. His eye ran keenly over the floor of the sea. Wind and tide ran strongly to the north-east. There, in the direction of the softly blowing wind, rose purple against the sky a crag-like rock. At its foot, he knew, was a cluster of fishermen's huts. If he reached it, he was safe.

He drank deeply of the clear rain-water lying sweet and cool in the hollows of the rock; made a rough breakfast of shellfish, and then turned himself resolutely to the task of reaching the land. It was, he calculated, some six miles distant. The sea-current would carry him there in half as many hours. It was a daring feat—a

mad feat. But there was a strange elation in Kit's blood. Some half-understood call which hurried him on was singing in his ears.

With quick, clever hands he dragged clear the fragment of spar which had been his friend during the wild night, pulled it over a narrow promontory of rock, and pushed it afloat in the sheltered waters to leeward.

The gale had blown itself out. There was a breath of summer warmth in the air. The sea was mild, and the current ran faster than Kit had guessed ; the distance to the land, too, was probably less than he had imagined. But hours of struggle, now swimming, now drifting, now almost unconscious, left him exhausted. He realized, too, in flashes of clearer reason, that some eddy in the sea-tide might sweep him past the island to sure destruction. The memory of that long struggle with the salt and strangling sea haunted his dreams for years afterwards. He was certainly a little off his head when he made the mad venture ; and long before the desperate swim was over he seemed to himself to be at times actually dying. A feebler will would probably have consented to death.

But Kit's stubborn courage bore him up. The sea was kindly ; the current ran fair ; the wind blew softly. Yet he could never have reached the coast. How long he drifted with the sliding tide he never knew ; but a little after noon the *Sarah Ann*, a bluff-bowed, weather-bleached fishing-craft, somehow butted up against him ; and John Thorne, a red-faced fisherman, dragged Kit's almost unconscious body over the side of the boat.

The *Sarah Ann* quickly ran down before the wind to the island, and John Thorne bore his bit of human

flotsam to his cottage and to the motherly care of his stout-bodied wife.

It was a fisherman's hut, with low walls and floor of earth, and rank with many ancient and fish-like smells. But warm-hearted Mrs. Thorne wrapped Kit's half-frozen body in warm blankets, poured hot milk down his swollen throat, and rubbed his chilled limbs till at last her patient fell into a stupor-like sleep, from which he did not wake till past noon the next day.

He found himself stiff in every limb, but otherwise strong and well. After a meal whose dimensions soothed even Mrs. Thorne's motherly concern, Kit persuaded her husband to hoist his dingy jib and brown mainsail and carry him over to the mainland.

As he stepped on to the pier in the little harbour of Middleford, it was nearly eleven o'clock at night. He stood for a moment, lifting his heart in gratitude to God for his deliverance. Then the strange sense of some imperative call which had haunted him for many hours seemed to take possession of him again; and, with a quick step, he trod the dark road betwixt the port and the town.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BURGLARY

IT was past midnight when Kit reached the slumbering town. The streets were empty and silent: the white moonlight lay on the roofs; the roadways in the shadows of the tall houses beneath were mere threads of blackness. Some unconscious instinct guided Kit's feet till he found himself standing before the bank, a solid-looking building, with granite front and barred windows. Somewhere within that black mass Kate was at that moment slumbering, and what dreams might not be creeping through the cells of her brain! Kit lingered, and wondered whether in those dreams his face sometimes appeared.

Sentiment in Kit, after the usual British fashion, was shy and inarticulate. In the keen daylight he would have been ashamed to stand and scan with sentimental eyes the silent house beneath whose roof dwelt the woman he loved. But with a midnight sky, moon-filled, above him, and the black streets where no whisper stirred, and no footfall could be heard about him, Kit stood as in a sort of waking dream.

As he stared and dreamed, suddenly a slender pencil of light shot out like a tiny spear of gold through the keyhole of the bank-door. A vague illumination gleamed at the same moment in the barred windows,

and then vanished. Kit stared with puzzled eyes. Whence came that sudden and mysterious gleam of light at midnight? It was furtive, guilty; it suggested crime. Was the bank being robbed?

Kit thrilled at the thought, and then grew cool. His senses were keenly alert. He ran lightly across the street, and listened at the door. There was no sound, and no return of that furtive gleam of sudden flame. Yet Kit felt oddly sure there was some one upon an evil errand within the walls of the bank.

A narrow passage ran down one side of the building, and Kit remembered that, looking down upon that passage, there was—set high in the wall—an old-fashioned window, square-headed and of massive frame. With quick but silent feet, he ran round the corner till he stood beneath the window. He put up his hand and pressed it. It confirmed all his suspicions to find that the sash yielded gently, and swung back for a few inches! Kit was of dauntless temper, and was an athlete. He grasped the sill with his hands, drew himself up till he sat on it, then he thrust back the window and peered into the dark banking-chamber. As he watched, suddenly, through the soundless darkness, there ran a faint gleam of light. It streamed from the manager's room.

A wiser man than Kit would have given the alarm to the nearest policeman. But the thought that here were burglars at work within the walls where Kate slept fired his brain. He swung his feet within the building, lowered himself softly, and stood, in a second, on the floor of the banking-chamber. He stole across to the teller's counter, leaped silently over it, and peeped into the manager's room. The room had two doors, one opening from behind the

teller's counter, the other opening from a passage used by customers of the bank. Kit pushed softly back the door at which he stood, and peered in. In the manager's room there was a large safe, meant not for bullion—which was kept in the strong-room—but for the temporary security of books and documents in actual use; though in careless fashion notes and gold were sometimes placed in it. Two figures stood in front of the safe, one holding a dark lantern, which threw a faint gleam of light on the safe door. While Kit looked, the safe door swung back with a harsh creak—how, Kit could not tell. One of the men lifted the lantern so as to throw its light into the recesses of the safe, and both bent down and peered in.

Kit seized the dramatic opportunity. He opened the door noiselessly and stepped with light-footed softness across the floor. He was perfectly familiar with the arrangements of the room, and he was so cool that he smiled, with half-boyish humour, as he thought of the surprise which was about to break upon the two thieves. No sense of odds, curiously enough, disturbed him.

The figure nearest to him was in a half-crouching, half-kneeling attitude. Kit lifted his foot, and gave a thrust on the fellow's shoulders so powerful that the man rolled helplessly over again and again on the floor; at the same moment Kit struck with all his might at the second figure, and then, with nimble fingers, seized the switch of the electric light, and turned it on.

The room was, in an instant, flooded with the keen, white, shadowless glare of the great arc lamp. Kit stood with threatening brow, and an attitude of attack, in front of the half-open safe.

One of the men gasped a fierce oath. The other glanced round for a second, with dazzled and amazed

vision, and then vanished through the further door, and Kit heard him leap at the window. His comrade was in the act of following, when he lingered irresolutely, turned, and looked at Kit.

'We've done the job,' he said, as if to himself; 'but, hang it, I'd like to do for you.'

He was a big, powerful man, of tiger-like activity, despite his great bulk. The next moment he leaped in, mute but ferocious, on Kit, and struck as he leaped. All had passed, so far, in silence. Kit twitched his head on one side as the man struck; nevertheless, the blow grazed his cheek and half staggered him. Kit had the Englishman's trick of growing cooler in a fight as he was hard pressed. He threw his assailant off, and, as he ran in again on him, still silent, he struck hard, and true, and quick, two fierce blows on the ruffian's face. The man staggered back, and his body struck the door with a shock. He turned to rush in again, but at that moment feet were heard moving quickly overhead, and the man, with one fierce curse, fled.

Kit stood, half-dazed, with bloody face; then, as he cleared his eyes, he saw the figure of Kate at the door. She stood silent, wide-eyed with amazement, her long rich hair falling in a shining flood about her, the white electric light making her cheeks curiously pallid.

'Oh, Kit,' she cried, 'what is it?'

Kit tried to tell, but, somehow, stammered in the process.

'Where is Mr. Arden?' he asked.

A step was heard coming, with curious hesitancy and slowness, down the stairs, and, in another moment, Mr. Arden stood in the room. He stared silently at Kit,

and cast a quick, strange look round the room. His eye gleamed as he saw the half-open safe.

‘What are you doing here, Somers?’ he demanded.

Kit’s speech had returned to him by this, and he told his story.

‘Then they robbed the safe,’ said Mr. Arden, with what Kit thought was an admirable coolness.

‘No, I stopped them.’

Mr. Arden looked at him, and again Kit noted the odd questioning look.

‘The safe is robbed,’ he declared positively, as he swung the door wide open. ‘The note-box is empty.’

‘They took nothing,’ persisted Kit.

By this time Kate, conscious of her dressing-gown and flowing hair, had vanished; the police were beating loudly at the door, and one helmeted head was peering in at the open window by which the burglars had fled.

The first constable who reached the scene was inclined to arrest Kit off-hand, on the evidence of his bleeding cheek and disordered dress, but yielded so far to Kit’s scornful protests as to wait till his inspector arrived.

The inspector was cool, alert, business-like, but the dispute puzzled him. Mr. Arden declared he was able, at a glance, to see that the entire stock of notes in the safe, more than £5,000, had vanished, together with some valuable securities; but Kit was equally certain that the burglars had carried off nothing.

‘You can’t be sure, Somers,’ said Mr. Arden curtly. ‘How long had the men been here before you broke in on them?’

But Kit was sure. The attitude of the men showed that they had just succeeded in opening the safe. They had not touched a coin or a paper in it.

Kit grew dogged, Mr. Arden was persistent.

The inspector, meanwhile, was examining the room. Somebody from within, he said, had shot back the bolt of the window, or with criminal carelessness it had been left unfastened. It had not been forced. The lock of the safe, too, was uninjured.

'What's up?' he muttered to himself. 'Who left that window open? How did the thieves come to have a key of the safe? And why were the notes and securities not in the strong-room?'

It was an ugly mystery, and its solution was by common agreement postponed to the next morning.

'That Somers will ruin us,' said Mr. Arden, with an agitation he strove in vain to hide, to Kate, the next morning, when they met at breakfast.

'How can he hurt you, father?' asked Kate, in wide-eyed wonder.

'He swears the men got nothing, and yet £5,000 has vanished. If the men did not get it, where is it? Confound him!' he added, as if to himself, but with bitter energy.

'Oh, father!' cried Kate.

'See here, Kate, get that meddling simpleton to admit that he's wrong, or at least that he may be wrong. You can turn him round your finger. If you don't, I am a ruined man. The cash is gone, and the papers. He says they did not take them. The next thing is, people will suspect that they weren't there to be taken, and that means I am the thief.'

Kate could only cry again in yet more indignant accents, 'Oh, father!'

Mr. Arden and Cecil had a hurried interview before the bank opened the next morning. Their talk ran in undertones.

'It's awkward,' said Mr. Arden, 'that fellow Somers turning up and swearing the men carried nothing off.'

'Well,' replied Cecil coolly, 'he's in it himself. How was it he gave no alarm till the noise of the fighting—if they did fight—aroused Kate?'

The two men looked at each other.

'No,' said Mr. Arden, with a sudden flush. 'Don't take away the lad's character.'

'It's his or yours,' whispered Cecil.

More distressing to Kit than even the unconcealed suspicions of the police was the interview he had with Kate during the morning. Kit told his tale afresh, not forgetting his fight for life in the storm; his desperate swim to the island; the strange, uncomprehended impulse that drew him to the bank; and Kate shed unashamed tears of horror and sympathy as she listened. She had not heard till that moment that he was on board the ill-fated boat. She was woman enough, too, to read more than Kit's somewhat clumsy syllables told. She guessed what the figure of her lover, watching in the white moonlight the house where she slept, meant.

Then Kit told the story of the gleam of light, the open window in the lane, the discovery of the men in the manager's room, at the very moment they were opening the safe.

'But,' said Kate, 'are you sure they had taken nothing out? How can you be sure? It was dark. You don't know how long the men had been there. And, don't you see, it is cruel to father? Don't you see how the doubt whether the men have carried off the missing notes may injure him?'

Kit saw this clearly enough, and ruefully enough; but he had a stubborn instinct of veracity. It was

not merely that he was obstinately incapable of a lie ; he could not be diplomatic. He was doggedly and awkwardly truthful. He stuck to his tale.

‘But,’ Kate asked, ‘didn’t you hear the men say, “We’ve done the job”?’

Yes, Kit admitted he had. He didn’t know what it meant ; but he was sure it didn’t mean that they had secured any plunder from the safe.

Then Kate at last broke out impatiently.

‘But, Kit, father is responsible for the cash, and what you say may injure him.’

‘Kate,’ said poor Kit, ‘I can’t say anything else.’

‘But you have no right to say that. It will destroy him.’

‘No, but it may destroy me. The police think I am guilty. Your father is ready to say it, and you think it, and all because I won’t tell a convenient lie.’

‘No,’ cried Kate, with energy, as the tears ran down her cheeks, ‘it is cruel to me to say that. But you are cruel to my father in the tale you tell. And oh, Kit,’ she added somewhat illogically, ‘you told me you loved me.’

Kit might have quoted the old heroic ditty :

I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more.

But, then, he was not given to quoting poetry at any time, and he and Kate parted sadly enough.

Kit the next morning was examined and re-examined. The police-inspector was not, on the whole, unsympathetic.

‘Look here, young fellow,’ he said, ‘it is a queer tale. That window was left unbolted. They got access to the safe with surprising ease ; £5,000 is gone, and

valuable papers. You say they hadn't time to take anything, and didn't take anything. Then did you? Or was it taken before the safe was opened at all? On your version, it's either you or the manager. It will be cleared up some day, but at present it's a very ugly tale. You will come out all right in the long-run; but, perhaps, for the present, you had better lie low. I will keep touch with you, and let you know if anything turns up.'

So Kit began at last to realize, with an amazement beyond speech, that he was himself suspected of being the thief, or an accomplice of the thieves. The bank directors took the view that the thieves had carried off the booty, and so stood by Mr. Arden.

The irony of the situation was cruel. He had risked his life to save the bank from being robbed, with the result that he was more than half suspected of being the robber himself. He could only clear his own character at the cost of ruining that of Mr. Arden, the father of the woman he loved. This was what that curious premonition, which brought him to the bank at the very moment it was being robbed, had produced!

CHAPTER XXII

KIT AND THE POLICE

THE next day a famous detective from London made his appearance, despatched at the request of the board of directors. He inspected the scene of the robbery with keen-eyed and scientific thoroughness. The incident of the window, and the question of whether it had been imperfectly fastened, or even opened from within, he passed over lightly, perhaps because the local inspector of police was inclined to make much of them.

‘A clever hand,’ he said, ‘would have got the bolt back easily.’

The detective lingered over Kit’s description of the two men. He naturally was able to describe more fully the man who had turned back to attack him, and the detective asked many shrewd questions about him.

‘That’s “Black Jim,” for a thousand pounds,’ he muttered, as if to himself. ‘What brought him down here?’

To Kit’s assertion that he had broken in on the pair before any booty had been secured, and the would-be robbers had fled empty-handed, the great man listened with even more satirical incredulity than the inspector had shown. He plainly thought that





‘YOU ARREST ME,’ HE CRIED PASSIONATELY.

Kit, for some purpose, was trying to conceal a robbery that had actually been committed, and in which it was even possible he had a share.

'Why,' he said, 'according to your own account, the big fellow said, "We've done the job."'

'Yes,' Kit admitted, and he could offer no explanation of the man's words; but he kept to his assertion that he had seen the door of the safe swing open, and one of the men lift his lamp to look in; but, before they had time to take anything out, he had leaped on them. Kit chafed under the keen, hard, unsympathetic questions of the detective. He felt them to be derisive and accusing, and he flashed out, at last, with a haughty and bitter retort.

'Look here, young fellow,' said the detective finally, 'you've got to tell a better tale than that. You're not telling all you know.'

'You're a fool,' was Kit's contemptuous reply.

'I may be a fool,' replied the detective, with a red face, 'but that's better than being a rogue. I must take charge of you, or you'll be off; and we can't afford to lose sight of you just yet,' and he put his hand on Kit's shoulder.

Kit went white—not with fear, but with anger.

'You arrest me!' he cried passionately, drawing himself back.

'Now, lad, keep cool,' broke in the inspector not unkindly. 'It will all come right, I've no doubt; but the way to make it all come wrong is to kick up a bobbery now. Pull yourself together,' he added sternly.

Kit, with a strong effort, kept control of himself.

'Do you want to handcuff me?' he asked, with a scornful laugh.

Mr. Arden began to protest, with much agitation, against the whole business, but no one paid any attention to him. A cab was called, into which the detective and Kit stepped, closely followed by the inspector, and the vehicle drove off to the local lock-up. As it moved off, Kit caught a glimpse of Mr. Arden, standing on the bank step, with perplexity and alarm written on every feature of his countenance. And even in the tumult of anger which filled his breast, Kit found room for a moment's wonder that the incident should so curiously affect Mr. Arden.

The detective, as well as Kit, had somewhat cooled down by the time the police-station was reached. Perhaps the visible disgust of the inspector had hinted caution.

'Look here,' he said, 'I won't enter a charge of burglary against you, for that's not bailable. I'll enter a charge of being illegally on the bank's premises.'

'Enter what you like,' replied Kit haughtily.

'I'll not enter anything at all,' went on the detective conciliatingly, 'if you'll tell me all you know of the business.'

'I have told you all. Enter what charge you please.'

The charge was entered; a few brief formalities followed; and then the cell-door shut with a clang. Kit sat in the dim, cold, stone-floored cell, filled with a wrathful amazement, beyond the power of speech to express, at the situation in which he found himself. He was so swallowed up in wonder, indeed, that, for a moment, anger vanished, and a grim sense of humour took its place. But this quickly passed, and a bitter sense of the injustice of it all took hold of him. It

ran like flame through his blood. He had risked his life to prevent a crime, with the result that he found himself suspected of being the criminal! It would surely have been a happier fate to have perished in the strangling waves on the night of the storm! Had he been saved for this, to be overwhelmed in a blacker sea of mere shame!

Presently, when the storm of his agitation had almost swept past, the cell door opened, and the inspector beckoned him out. Mr. Arden and John Blunt stood in the little office. They had just signed bail bonds for him. Kit was free. He tried to thank them both, but he could, somehow, find no voice. A touch of unexpected kindness had broken him down.

'Come and see me to-morrow night,' whispered Mr. Arden, as he put a cold hand into Kit's; and he hurried away, with curious expedition.

John Blunt stayed to impart comfort, with characteristic directness.

'It's all right, lad. That detective's a fool, and only fools will believe him.'

'But fools are apt to be in a majority, Mr. Blunt,' Kit replied, with a touch of natural bitterness.

'No, lad, they're not. And even fools will have sense enough to know that you're not a rogue. Why, it's written on your face, man!' he added, with a laugh.

'I'm sorry that a jury of fools may be called upon to say whether the writing's plain, or whether, after all, I haven't suddenly become a rogue.'

John could only pat him vigorously on the back, by way of showing his confidence; and Kit found the process soothing, if uncomfortably vigorous.

One thing which filled poor Kit's mind as he sat in his room with a sense of half-bitter wonder was the circumstance that none of his natural friends and helpers came to his assistance. Why did not Mr. Jevons or Mr. Twitters appear to bail him out? Did they believe him guilty? Would they take no risk for him? A strain of angry doubt crept for a moment into his usually healthy mind. Did a non-Christian creed yield a finer generosity than that which grew under the shadow of a Christian church?

But while he meditated, restlessly gnawing his lip, there came a knock at the door. It was Mr. Walton, his usually benevolent face wearing a look of battle. He clasped Kit's hand with energy, while an odd expression of mingled humour and wrath burned in his eyes, and words seemed to fail on his lips.

'To arrest you, Kit!' he at last succeeded in saying. 'What lunacy! And I never heard of it,' he went on, in exasperated tones, 'till I got back to Middleford to-night.'

Kit found the honest anger in Mr. Walton's eyes an inexplicable comfort. It warmed his chilled spirit like some kindly fire. He was human enough to want some one to be angry on his behalf!

Mr. Walton's vigorous cross-examination soon put him in possession of all the facts of the case, and then his anger rose to a higher pitch than ever. He even discovered a new reason for indignation in Kit's own calmness, a circumstance which Kit found both soothing and entertaining. Kit's wonder that John Blunt and Mr. Arden should have bailed him out was not shared by Mr. Walton.

'Of course they would,' he replied hotly. 'Why not? They label themselves Free-thinkers, but they

have not succeeded yet in stripping themselves of all orthodox graces. John Blunt, at least, is a better Christian than he imagines himself to be, and than many persons are whose belief is orthodox beyond suspicion.'

Then Mr. Walton looked at Kit with shrewd eyes.

'Kit, you are foolish enough to be sore that none of your church friends came to your help.'

Kit, with a heightened colour, admitted that he felt it to be odd that Mr. Twitters or Mr. Jevons, who knew him well, had not come to him.

'Or me?' burst in Mr. Walton.

'No, not you, sir. I wondered, perhaps, but felt sure you did not know.'

'My dear lad, there are a hundred people in Middleford who would gladly take any risk for you. Twitters is a timid man; Mr. Jevons is not very heroic; and both are slow. But do them justice. They were waiting for my return. We went to the police-station at once together, and found you were free. I would not let them come with me here, but in their own timid way they were perfectly loyal to you.'

Mr. Arden, on reaching the bank, found Kate sitting at the tea-table, waiting for him.

'Well, Kate,' he said, 'that obstinate donkey, your friend Somers, has got himself into a queer fix over this business. He has been arrested.'

The cup fell from Kate's hand, and was shattered to pieces on the tray. She looked at her father with startled eyes, and face from which every trace of colour had faded.

'Arrested!' was all she could say.

'Yes, arrested for being mixed up in the robbery.'

'Kit?' gasped Kate, in incredulous and questioning tones. 'Oh, father! Is he in jail now?'

'No, John Blunt and I bailed him out.'

'Thank God!' cried Kate. 'That was fine! That was noble!' and she ran with shining eyes and flushed cheeks to kiss her father.

Her caress seemed curiously to discompose him.

'It's all right,' he said peevishly. 'Of course the charge was absurd. But he shouldn't have been so obstinate.'

Kate was still looking at her father with wet and tender eyes that shone like stars.

'Oh, father, I am glad you did it.'

'Why shouldn't I have done it?' asked Mr. Arden, almost fretfully.

But Kate did not explain. She hardly realized herself, perhaps, that she rejoiced her father had helped Kit, because it was the next thing to helping him herself. She felt, too, that her father had acted magnanimously; and this thrilled her with gladness.

'But must he appear in court to-morrow?' she asked, her face again blanching.

'Of course; but the charge against him is ridiculous. I only hope he won't play the fool again by sticking to his tale of no robbery, when the money's actually gone.'

It was late the next day when the case was called upon, and Kit surrendered to his bail. After a brief argument, the magistrates decided to hear the whole tale of the robbery. Mr. Arden gave formal evidence, and then Kit was allowed to make his statement. The case quickly resolved itself into a dispute as to whether or not an actual robbery had been committed.

Mr. Arden was recalled, to his manifest discomposure. He explained that the cash-book had disappeared, apparently carried off by the robbers, with the rest of their booty, in mere haste, or perhaps they had carried it off for another reason. From an examination of the other books he was able to say there was in the safe on the night of the robbery over £5,000 in Bank of England notes, and these had vanished.

‘Were the numbers of the notes on record?’ it was asked.

‘No; unfortunately the record was in the book which had been carried off; and perhaps that was the very reason why it was taken, so that no means of stopping the notes, or of tracing them, would remain.’

The court adjourned at this stage, and Kit’s bail was renewed. As Mr. Arden turned away from signing the bond afresh, he said briefly to Kit:

‘Come and see me to-night; I will be in my office at eight o’clock.’

As Kit rang the private bell of the bank that night, Mr. Arden was sitting in his office. He had a little cluster of papers before him, which he was examining with somewhat lack-lustre eyes. He had been soothing his nerves with an opiate, in the usual deadly fashion, after the excitement of the day, and his senses were half dazed. As Kit entered he caught up one of the papers before him, and thrust it into his breast-pocket, and then turned to meet his visitor. He smiled on him in friendly fashion, but Kit was struck with the filmed look of his eyes and the half-dreaming expression of his face.

‘Thank you, sir, for giving bail for me,’ said Kit.

'I never thought,' he went on, with a bitter smile, 'that any one in Middleford would have had the chance of rendering me that strange service.'

'I was glad to do it, Somers,' Mr. Arden replied, with a benevolent air. 'The police are idiots, and we'll make short work of their charge to-morrow. But, Somers, don't let that bee stick in your bonnet to-morrow about there being no robbery. The men got away with their plunder right enough. They hadn't time to try the strong-room, but they took the notes and the papers from that safe.'

Kit was silent. He did not wish to have any dispute with Kate's father, and with the man who had stood his friend that day. But his silence seemed to irritate Mr. Arden.

'Don't you think it is possible you are mistaken?' he demanded.

'Yes, it's possible, and I assert nothing. I only describe what I saw.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Arden, who seemed to have shaken off his drowsiness for the moment, 'but it was a dim light, and one's senses—especially when one is excited—play strange tricks. Look here, Somers, here is a copy of the list of cash and securities both in the strong-room and in the safe. We have made it out with great care from the various books. Look at it yourself. Take it with you, and look over it quietly to-night. It will convince you.'

Kit took the paper with ill-disguised reluctance. He did not feel called upon to be a judge in that matter, and no ingenious list of figures could shake him out of the certainty of his own senses. How could any list convince him? But Mr. Arden pressed it on him with half-dazed obstinacy, and he at last took the paper.

He lingered awhile, hoping he might see Kate. His heart ached for a sight of her face, with a friendly look shining in her eyes. But no Kate appeared. Mr. Arden maundered on disconnectedly, sometimes half-dozing, till in despair Kit took his leave.

CHAPTER XXIII

KATE'S CRUELTY

THAT night, after he had gone to his bedroom, Kit took the paper out of his pocket and opened it carelessly. It was in Cecil's writing, endorsed on one corner, 'Cash and securities in hand,' with his initials. It was done very roughly, like a hasty private memorandum, not like a statement intended for official use. The figures Mr. Arden had quoted before the magistrate were vaguely in Kit's memory; and, as he looked at the totals on the paper in his hand, they seemed to be different. His curiosity, moreover, was quickened by the circumstance that there was no note of any cash being in the manager's safe; apparently it was all in the strong-room. He got the evening paper, where Mr. Arden's evidence was given in detail. Yes, the figures were different, and there was certainly no mention in Cecil's memorandum of the £5,000 in notes Mr. Arden had declared to have been in his safe, and which were missing. Perhaps this was a memorandum showing what was in the safe after the robbery. But no! As Kit examined it closely he found a date roughly endorsed in one corner. It was the very day before the robbery.

Kit was not quick-witted, but he had a certain luminous and obstinate common sense that reached

its goal later than nimbler brains, perhaps, but grasped it more surely than they. As he looked at the figures before him, the colour came and went in his cheeks. His breath quickened. The meaning of the figures was slowly becoming clear in his brain. Cecil's memorandum was a statement of the actual cash and securities in hand when the robbery—real or sham—took place. It showed apparently that the £5,000 was not in the safe, or anywhere else. In that case, the robbery was a trick designed to plausibly cover the absence of cash already lost. Cecil and Mr. Arden were accomplices in the trick. For their own guidance they had privately kept an account of the cash actually in the bank, and this was what Kit held in his hand. Mr. Arden had plainly given him the wrong paper. His old chum, and the father of the girl he loved, were nothing better than a pair of rogues.

Kit did not, by conscious, voluntary effort, build up this conclusion. It built itself up in his brain! Each link in the chain forged itself without stroke of hammer! But the process was resistless! Kit was frozen with astonishment and shame. His mind seemed to act automatically, and independently of his will. He was watching, as though drawn on the air in lines of fire, the evolution of a crime, a crime where last and least of all a crime was to be suspected. And he saw the whole process with a mental vision so keen and sure that he could no more doubt it than he could doubt the witness of his physical senses.

Kit had sunk into his chair, and put his head into his hands. The sudden vision of unsuspected roguery almost overwhelmed him. He could understand, now, how unwelcome was his appearance on the scene, and how full of peril to the true criminals was his

evidence. A hundred odd little incidents—words, looks, gestures—became intelligible. They fell into order, and constituted a chain of resistless proofs. Cecil, the friend of so many years, was a thief. Aye, and Kate's father was his accomplice, if not his tempter and leader. Mr. Arden, in his bemused condition, had given him that fatal paper. He held in his hand the evidence which might send the father of the girl he loved to a jail-cell.

His own peril was clear to Kit. One crime makes all others possible. To secure their own safety, Cecil and Mr. Arden would, if necessary, ruin him. They were bitter moments for Kit, as he sat there, seeing with a vision that grew ever clearer the whole ugly landscape of the crime; moments that might well have wrecked the faith, or soured for all time the mood, of a less wholesome nature than that which Kit possessed.

But, to do him justice, Kit thought only of Kate. He held in his hand not only her father's character and freedom, but Kate's happiness. How could he speak the word which would break her heart and blacken her life? Never! There rose to his imagination her face, so clear and pure and sweet; her brow grave with thought, but as yet unshadowed by trouble. True, when he last saw it, it wore against him a look of grief and of indignation. He had never before seen such a gleam of angry fire in Kate's deep eyes, or such an aspect of displeasure on her calm brow. But she was angry with generous, if mistaken, indignation for her father; and Kit found it easy to forgive her. He would not wound her, even if, as an alternative, he had to go to a jail-cell himself.

But then, what did duty, Wordsworth's 'stern law-

giver,' say? He must do right in scorn of consequences—of consequences either to Kate or himself. Did duty require him to expose Mr. Arden and his accomplice?

On that question he brooded the whole night long, pacing restlessly to and fro; sometimes casting himself down by his bedside in an agony of prayer and distress. But no sign was given him. No sudden gleam of light shot across the dark landscape of his thoughts, such as he might be sure shone direct from heaven. God does not always manifest Himself by signs, nor grant to the perplexed human soul such easy resolutions of difficulty. The conscience has to be tested by conflict, to be tempered in anguish and uncertainty, as steel is tempered by ice and fire.

Slowly, through clouded lights and thronging doubts, Kit's mind—he scarcely himself knew how—reached a decision. He would make no use of the fatal paper in his hands. That this might mean some risk to himself he knew; in his mood of feeling, indeed, that circumstance was one more argument for adopting the course on which he had decided. But what about the bank? Was he to leave it without warning in the hands that had already robbed it?

Kit decided that, after the trial was over, he would in some way let Mr. Arden know how he had held his fate in his hands, and why he had spared him. Neither Cecil nor Mr. Arden would attempt a new fraud, when they knew the proof of the wrong they had already done had been seen by other eyes than their own, and could be used against them. But not even to save Kate's father, or Kate herself, would he lie! He would tell his story exactly as it happened.

A morbid conscience, or one more sensitive, might

have found it impossible to be content with such a decision. But Kit was acting according to the best light he had ; and it was characteristic of his mental and moral type that, having once reached a decision, he refused to rediscuss it, even in the secret forum of his own conscience.

Kit stood in the court the next morning, looking curiously haggard, but composed. He told his tale ; and, to Mr. Arden's alarm and anger, repeated his assertion that he saw the safe-door swing open, and, as far as his senses could be trusted, he was sure nothing had been taken from it.

He was cross-examined ruthlessly ; but having made his plain statement, he kept modestly but firmly to it. He was not believed by the bench.

'The robbery is clear enough,' said the presiding magistrate ; 'the prisoner's tale is a mere theory. He might not, indeed, have told all he knew.'

The evidence in support of the charge of being illegally on the bank premises was, however, slight, and he was discharged. But as Kit walked out of the court he knew it was with a ruined character. Every door would be shut against him. He must seek another field. England was lost to him. He would leave for South Africa by the earliest boat. The post offered to him would hardly be withdrawn. His reputation as a mining engineer, when weighed in the rough balances of a mining company, would outweigh even a damaged character. But he must see Kate first.

He was in a mood that made him disregard all conventions. He might well find Mr. Arden's door shut against him ; but he knocked at it with a resolution bred of mingled distress and desperation.

'Yes, Miss Arden would see him,' the maid informed him.

Kate, as yet, had only her father's version of what had occurred in court. The charge against Kit had been dismissed; he was free from suspicion or peril; and Kate did not in the least realize the irremediable wrong done to his character and prospects. Her mind, freed from anxiety for Kit, found leisure to become indignant for her father. Kit, it seems, had persisted in the tale that imperilled her father, that put his honour in doubt; and this after her own appeal, and in spite of the magnanimity which her father had shown in standing by him when he was arrested.

Kate could thoroughly understand Kit's unshakable persistency; under other conditions, she could even have admired it. But in the rush of indignant feeling which swept over her, his conduct seemed ungrateful and base. It filled her with resentment, a resentment which had a generous root; for it was a daughter's anger kindled by a slander against her father. And, though Kate was not conscious of the circumstance, yet perhaps what she resented most in Kit was that he had wrecked her ideal of him. And with characteristic ill-fortune Kit sought the woman he loved just at the moment when she was in this mood.

The expression on Kate's face as she entered the room sent a chill, as of ice, through poor Kit's heart. The pale cheeks, the lines of resolution round the sensitive lips, the sparkle of indignation in the deep and tender eyes, froze his speech.

'I almost wonder you came, Mr. Somers,' she said.

'Why do you wonder?' he asked; then he stopped, and his face flushed. Did Kate believe in the shameful charge brought against him? Was the loss, not only

of her friendship, but of her respect, the price he had to pay for sparing her father?

Kate misunderstood the break in Kit's speech, but she saw the sudden flush in his cheek; and even a woman's gentleness can be very cruel sometimes.

'Yes, Kit,' she said sadly, 'you do well to blush. I never thought to blush for you; but my cheek burned when I heard that, to the very last, you persisted in that foolish tale which puts a stain on my father's name. What has my father done, that you wish to ruin him?'

'Wish to ruin him?' asked Kit, with a queer smile, which Kate, even in her anger, noted and wondered at.

'Yes! Did he not deal generously with you? And oh, Kit,' she added, her voice breaking, 'is he not my father? Could you not remember that?'

By this time Kit was calm, and Kate was conscious he was looking at her with eyes of pity, as though she were in the wrong, and not he. She remembered it better afterwards. At the moment it kindled, she hardly knew why, her anger afresh.

'I am going to Africa,' said Kit steadily, 'and could not go without seeing you'; and he stopped, waiting for some word or look of regret.

Kate heard what he said with a sharp but uncomprehending pang; but at the moment she was looking at her lover through the lens of what she believed to be a just anger. Behind the anger—its root, though Kate hardly realized it—was the bitter disappointment she felt at Kit's failure in consideration and generosity. He was less noble than she had imagined. An idol was shattered. Kit was capable of injuring another, rather than admit himself to be wrong; and the one who was injured was her father. Betwixt her

and Kit there rose, in Kate's vision, the face of her injured father. Had she cared less for Kit, or been less jealous for his truth and goodness, she would have felt a less noble anger than that which now burned in her blood.

But the look of grief and scorn sat yet on her face, and Kit saw it. He would not argue against it, nor defend himself.

Both were calm now ; but both felt that they were drifting hopelessly asunder.

'Give this to your father,' said Kit, handing Kate an envelope ; 'he will understand what it means.'

He was heroically bent on saving Kate from the tragedy of knowing the truth about her father ; but her hand should give back to Mr. Arden the fatal paper. It seemed, somehow, to Kit, that the proof of his crime, given back to him by the unconscious hand of his daughter, would be the most effective rebuke and check Mr. Arden could receive.

'Good-bye,' he said ; and Kate was doomed to recall with a pang, for many a day, the smile on his lips, the look in his eyes, as he stretched out his hand.

'We have been friends for years, Kate ; we will part as friends. God bless you !'

Kate looked at him with uncomprehending eyes. In a moment he was gone. She walked with set, white face to her room ; when she had closed and locked the door she fell on her knees by her bedside. For a while she was silent. She was not praying, except with that speechless silence which is, in God's ears, the truest and humblest of prayers. Then a sob quivered in her throat, and in another moment she was shaken with a passion of tears. It was not merely that Kit had gone, that her love for him, unconfessed and unrecognized,

was wounded. Her idol had perished. The Kit she thought she knew did not exist.

Mr. Arden noted his daughter's sad and listless silence at tea, and resented it. Was she taking sides with that dangerous young fool?

'Young Somers,' he said, 'is starting for Africa. That's the only sensible thing he has done in his foolish and obstinate lifetime.'

'Yes,' replied Kate; 'and, by the way, he gave me this note for you,' and she handed her father Kit's envelope.

Mr. Arden took it, and opened it. He stared at it for a moment with puzzled eyes, and then his face went ghastly white.

'You are ill, father,' cried Kate.

'No,' he stammered, and tried to rise; but was, for the moment, unable to do so. Kate ran quickly to his side.

'Oh, father! what is it? Let me get you something!'

'No, no, let me alone. I am a bit shaken'; and roughly resenting all help, he walked with stumbling feet to his office, and Kate heard the key turn in the lock.

She went slowly to her room. What mystery was behind all this? What letter was this which had power to shake her father's composure so terribly? She was walking in deep waters.

Mr. Arden, as soon as he reached his office, sank into his chair, and with trembling fingers opened the paper which he held crushed in his hand. It was Cecil's secret and accurate list of the cash and securities actually in hand at the time of the robbery. But how had it come into Kit's possession? Mr. Arden took from his pocket a little bundle of papers, and, with shaking hands, eagerly spread them out.

He realized, in a moment, what had happened. He had given Kit the wrong paper. Did Kit himself understand what the document meant? For a moment Mr. Arden hoped he had missed its meaning. Then he thought of the lad's steady eyes, his face with its look of latent keenness and power, and his hope vanished. Yes; Kit, he was sure—and with a conviction that he could not explain—must know the full significance of the paper. But, then, why had he returned it, without a word, and by his unconscious daughter's hand? Why was he going himself to South Africa?

Then a new and sharper pang still ran along Mr. Arden's nerves. He saw with sudden vision how nobly Kit was acting. He understood the mute appeal of the returned document, given back to him by his innocent daughter's hand. The vision of Kit's magnanimity stung Mr. Arden's long-drugged and drowsy conscience. It helped him to judge himself.

'Would to God,' he whispered to himself, 'that I had this lad's clean conscience!'

Life has strange ironies. At the very moment Kate was weeping, half-scorched with shame, for what she supposed was the moral fall of her lover, Mr. Arden, sitting in his office, with a bitter groan of self-scorn, was hating himself because he had not that lover's moral erectness!

All the great faculties of the human soul are curiously allied. One cannot be touched without the others instantly responding. Mr. Arden's conscience was stung to the very quick; and the trouble of his conscience stirred his imagination. It startled his memory. From a thousand long-shut cells in that memory there crept out incidents in his own life. He had the vision

of himself as a lad, high-minded, generous, with brave ideals and a scorn of base things. Yes! once he, too, could have played Kit's part. But now he felt sunk beneath it by measureless degrees. He looked up to it as an unhappy wretch drowning in some vile stream might look up to the unstained brightness of a star.

Long into the night on which the fatal paper came back to him Mr. Arden sat and brooded. He doubted, at first, whether he should tell Cecil what had happened; but he must tell some one. In the morning he called Cecil into his office, and laid the fatal paper on the table before him.

'Young Somers,' he said briefly, 'has had that, and has sent it back to me. He knows all about it.'

'Good God!' gasped Cecil, as his face went suddenly white.

Mr. Arden stumbled on with his story, telling it with many a shame-filled pause. He had blundered and given Kit the wrong paper.

'You fool,' muttered Cecil softly, as if to himself.

Mr. Arden winced. But this was part of his punishment. The time for conventions, or for any respect for them, had long since passed.

'Did he understand the meaning of these figures?' asked Cecil.

'I have no doubt of it.'

'But the paper proves nothing.'

'It is in your handwriting; it has your initials; and look at the date on it. That date is the very day before that accursed robbery took place.'

Cecil stared at the document with twitching lips and fear-drawn face.

'But,' he cried at last, with a gasp of relief, 'the fool has given it you back, anyway. He can do nothing.

Unless,' he added suddenly, 'he has shown it to somebody else ; or has taken a photo of it before sending it back. In that case it is a mere trap.'

Mr. Arden was sure Kit had done neither. He made no attempt to explain the silent appeal made by the return of the paper through Kate's hand. He felt Cecil would be quite untouched by such an appeal ; he would not even understand it. There was a fast-widening moral interval betwixt these two men ; but only Mr. Arden was conscious of it. All that Cecil felt was that his accomplice was betraying a deplorable weakness.

Cecil was brooding, meanwhile, on the whole situation.

'He is a fool,' was his final summary of it. 'He might have kept the paper, and then he could have made his own terms with us ; or he might have sent it to the Board. That would have ruined us and made his case clear. Why has he sent it back in this fashion, and going off to South Africa? No one shall have such a chance against us again,' he added, as he seized the incriminating paper, and flung it into the fire. A flash of white flame and it was gone.

'That's safe, at all events.'

'But Kit?' urged Mr. Arden ; 'he knows.'

'Well, who will believe him?' asked Cecil coolly. 'Who will believe that, having this proof, he gave it back to us? What a tale of a tub for any one outside a lunatic asylum to tell!'

'But it is rough on Somers,' urged Mr. Arden.

'Well, do you want it to be rougher still on us? It is every man for himself. At all events, if it is a question betwixt that young fool and myself, you

may depend upon it I won't give myself away. Perhaps you will, Mr. Arden?' he went on bitterly. 'You did it. You risked putting handcuffs on the wrists of both of us, when you gave young Somers that paper.'

Mr. Arden was silent. Cecil watched him keenly, and with a vague sense of alarm.

'Look here,' he said, 'you have nothing to do but sit fast and hold your tongue. What does it matter what becomes of that young simpleton? He has made his own bed and must lie on it.'

'The old man's going to pieces,' was Cecil's reflection, as he walked back to his desk. 'He may give the whole thing away. It is getting too risky. I must keep my hand on him.'

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LOGIC OF A BAD CREED

IT was a wild, black night; a night which, although it belonged to early summer, suggested the bitterest hour of winter. Wildly the wind raved. The rain beat angrily on the shaking window-panes. From a sunless dawn to a starless night the rain had fallen; and betwixt the weeping skies and sodden earth no bird had sung, and no cheerful gleam had shone. Smears had wandered in the storm, finding, in its blackness and sobbing fury, a sort of echo and reflection of the sunless gloom which lay on his own heart.

He loitered for a while on the once familiar bridge. Still the stream ran, coming from some unguessed source, and hurrying to some dark and undreamed-of goal. And as Smears leaned over the wet parapet, the weeping skies above him and the sighing waters beneath, he felt the forlornest outcast the universe knew. He took his new creed, as we have seen, seriously, and even tragically. He was but a vagrant drop in some yet darker stream! Suppose one of those drops endowed for a moment with consciousness. It could discuss art and philosophy, and weigh creeds, and speculate about the universe. Would it be worth

while for the drop to employ itself in such a fashion in that swift, vanishing pause which came before the river swept it away? And man was exactly such a vagrant drop, and what he called life was only a pause ere the black stream swept it away. There was no meaning in existence. There was neither use nor hope for it. There was hope for 'the race,' perhaps; but none for the individual. Man the unit was but a finer sort of coral insect, working in the reef; and he must die content with having contributed one poor grain of lime to the reef. But 'the race' is only a phrase—an abstraction. It is the individual which suffers, hopes, despairs, dies.

And then 'the race': what title had it to meaning or dignity? Smears looked at the stretch of slums before him, the tangle of lanes, with its inhabitants, as foul as the insects hidden beneath a stone—unwashed; frescoed with rags; their speech a mosaic of blasphemy. They ate like dogs; they represented that worst type of the savage, the failure of civilized forces. An undivine content with ignorance, filth, and vice lay upon them. Seen against the background of the tremendous forces which rush through space and time, what was such a race but a swarm of midges, doomed to perish in the chill of black and swift-coming night? And what were the passions, the prayers, the struggles, the sorrows and aspirations of men, but the flutter of a midge's wings?

It was a sign of his morbid condition that Smears, in his present mood, could extract gall out of the honey of his best-loved poet. He murmured, with a bitter smile, the lines of his one-time favourite Tennyson:

What the philosophies, all the sciences, poesy, varying voices of prayer?

All that is noblest, all that is basest, all that is filthy with all that is fair!

.

What but a murmur of gnats in the gloom, or a moment's anger of bees in their hive?

At the street corner Smears met a little human mite in rags, bare-footed on the wet pavement, bare-headed under the pelting rain. She had crept out in terror from the cellar—the only home she knew—where a drunken father and a half-drunken mother raged and swore and fought together. Smears emptied the contents of his pockets into the weeping child's fingers—blue and trembling with cold—and then proceeded with morbid art to turn the trembling little figure into a parable. That tiny human waif, homeless, unpitied, with the heavens black above her, and the heedless winds blowing cruelly upon her, became to his vision a type of the human race. It, too, was homeless and forgotten. The elemental powers, blind, inexorable, pitiless, took no heed of it. Nowhere from those deep gulfs of space beyond the stars did a hand of tender purpose reach out towards it. What was man but a grain of sand caught in the sweep of some whirlwind of blind and unconscious forces?

Of course the compassion that stirred in Smears's own brooding and unhappy heart towards the little shivering child might have taught him that somewhere in the universe there was a great Fountain of Pity. How else did that divine emotion stir in Smears's own imperfect human heart? Could it come uncaused? Or was Smears himself of a higher and

nobler moral type than the Intelligence which planned Smears himself, as part of the universe, and then forgot His own work? Could that Power give him a diviner impulse than moved in itself? For Browning's great lines are true:

A loving worm within its clod
Were nobler than a loveless God.

The sublime logic of a familiar Psalm, somehow, never suggested itself to Smears: *He that planted the ear, shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see?* It was but one step of sure reasoning, further, to argue: He that teacheth man pity, shall He not be pitiful?

But in the scheme of the universe, Smears had now learned there was no place for pity or for love. Nature was but a many-linked chain of inexorable law. Yet Smears's heart was certainly part of the universe, and pity, somehow, existed in it! His own consciousness gave the lie to the dreadful theory of an uncompassionate universe. He might have guessed that compassion in himself was but the broken human reflection of a perfect and divine Compassion, which brooded over all suffering worlds.

Smears, alas! had accepted without challenge the teaching which dismissed a personal God, capable of personal relationships and emotions, from His own universe. And pity is a strictly personal emotion. So the universe shrank to a tangle of passionless and impersonal laws. As a result beauty had perished from the stars, glory from the light, their message from the flowers. This creed had killed his art; and when Smears's art died, life was left without strength to survive. He was a shivering human intelligence,

standing under the empty heavens; yearning for sympathy, for knowledge, for love. But it was the mere irony of the universe that planted these longings in him—only for the purpose of mocking them!

True, there were other men and women with whom relations of love and help were possible; but that part of Mr. Gifford's system of ethics which taught that the unit must live for the mass—the individual for society, the grain for the planet, the glow-worm for the sun—had never captured Smears's imagination. Every other human being was, like himself, an idle spark, that shone for a moment, and then faded. Multiply such a cipher as man by what factors you pleased, nothing but ciphers was produced.

With some the mere vigour of the appetites might supply a reason for living. It was good to be warm, to be well-fed, to have the pockets full and the senses gratified. But in Smears's frail body the flame of appetite burned faintly. The one passion of his life was for art; and the creed which took the message from the lark's song, and the splendour from dawn and sunset, killed all art. The human race, as he now saw it, was a dance of accidental atoms, to be swept away by the next gust. Why help to keep this dance of atoms going?

The logic of Smears's creed was, in a word, suicide. At least, death meant escape from disquiet, and from the anguish of consciousness. No more problems for the tired brain! No more hunger for the unfed heart! Here, it seemed, was an escape from the icy chill of a pitiless and brainless system of worlds.

'Thank God for death,' said Smears. 'Dark death, which would pour sleep on the tired eyelids, and forgetfulness on the aching brain!' But why should he 'thank God' for it? There was no 'God' in the business! But, whoever planned it, death was a door out of an unfriendly darkness into a darkness, it might be hoped, unvexed of dreams, untroubled by thought.

Smears sat in the room which was once his studio, and more than one unfinished canvas told of the tragedy of arrested purpose, and of a frozen imagination. The old woman who kept house for him had been sent away on some remote errand. He sat alone, while the doors creaked to the challenge of the wind, and the rain beat with moist, insistent sharpness at the windows. There rose in the poor lad's sorrow-darkened imagination the vision of his youth: his dead mother's face, with its brooding melancholy; the hymns with which she used to hush him to sleep; the Bible stories she told him, as—her frail and tender hand caressing his hair—they sat by the fireside. How did there come into existence, under a scheme of evolution which knew nothing of tenderness, a soul so pitiful, a relationship so loving—if so brief? It was part of the irony of Nature, making sport of her own offspring. If death would only bring him once more the touch of those hands, the music of that tender voice, the benediction of that mother's love, how he would welcome 'the shadow feared of man'! But death held in its dusty palm no gifts of this kind.

Smears poured into a tumbler from a phial a few colourless drops. Here were the true waters of Lethe! As Smears pictured himself standing on the edge of that dark yet friendly stream, suddenly there rolled

over the shaking house a crash of thunder. The sound, by some strange magic, stirred the long-sealed cells of his memory; and—as if keeping time to the iron reverberations of the storm-vexed skies—there crept through the chambers of his brain the iron syllables of the old monkish chant:

Dies irae, dies illa,
Solvat saeculum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sybilla.

Quantus tremor est futurus,
Quando Iudex est venturus,
Cuncta stricte discussurus.

Latin was the one branch of scholarship in which Smears excelled; but it was not the Latin of Livy and of Caesar, whose sentences, to his ears, seemed to vibrate with the drums and trappings of mighty conquests. It was the sweet, sad chant of monkish hymns, dying away in the aisles of vast cathedrals; the Latin of Augustine and of à Kempis, of Ambrose and of Bernard of Clairvaux. But of all that he knew of those half-forgotten singers of the Middle Ages, why did only the stern syllables of the *Dies Irae* of Thomas of Celano awaken in his memory and shake it with their harsh challenge?

But while he thought and brooded, the *Dies Irae* itself—each syllable like the clang of an iron bell—grew soft and tender. Half unconsciously he recited:

Recordare, Iesu pie
Quod sum causâ tuæ viae;
Ne me perdas illâ die!

Quaerens me sedisti lassus,
Redemisti crucem passus,
Tantus labor non sit cassus.

How did those old monks conceive that thought of Love, with worn feet and heavy cross, seeking the wandering human soul? Then there came into his memory, answering some mystic thrill of association, the lines in which one of the most famous of English statesmen has clad in monkish Latin one of the most evangelical of modern hymns, 'Rock of Ages':

Jesus, pro me perforatus,
Condar intra Tuum latus,
Tu per lympham profluentem,
Tu per sanguinem tepentem;
In peccata mī redunda,
Tolle culpam! sordes munda!

Here was deep calling to deep—or, rather, saint chanting to saint—across nearly six centuries! What an example of the persistency of ideas! Was there any fact in the universe to correspond to the music of these hymns? If there were, how the universe would be transfigured! And, at the thought, Smears put down for a moment his glass, with the deadly fluid in it, and lifted his head. He looked with questioning eyes, as though expecting to see on the canvas of the darkness some divine, all-gracious Face reveal itself. He listened, as though for the whisper of some tender voice out of the silence.

But there was no sign nor sound, save that, in another moment, there came a yet deeper and more sullen crash of thunder from the skies; a wilder shriek of wind-driven rain on the shaking building. Then the iron syllables of 'Dies Irae, dies illa' began to repeat themselves in his tired head.

Smears shuddered for a moment; then his heart swung back, like a pendulum at the pull of gravitation,

to the creed which left his life without salt. He took the tumbler again in his hand, this time with resolute purpose.

But he put it down once more. Before he drank he would scribble a farewell message to Mr. Gifford. He recollected that Mr. Gifford—as though conscious that the logic of his theology pointed towards suicide—had dwelt with eloquent emphasis on the ‘cowardice’ of that step. A suicide was a sentry who left his post; a comrade who turned his back on his fellows. And, by some odd turn of thought, Smears felt anxious to enter a plea against that unspoken accusation of cowardice. He took a pen, and wrote with nervous haste:

‘ . . . You may count my death an act of cowardice ; I shall not complain. All moral terms have, somehow, lost their meaning for me. Why is it an act of cowardice to lay down a burden which was put on my shoulders without my consent ; or to deliver myself from a life which has neither meaning nor goal ? Why keep the mill-stones turning, when there is no wheat to be ground, and the stones grind only themselves ? I might, as you urged, try to make the lives of others happy, and so put a savour into my own life. But what “happiness” is possible to anybody except the happiness of swine with a trough full of acorns ? The one thing to be coveted for the race is an agreement of universal suicide. Human life is a mistake. We are accidents, without meaning ; and we are mocked, by some dreadful irony, with instincts which are lies. Our highest aspiration is the desire of the moth for the star. But who put that desire into the moth ? Who set the star so high ? Who

taught the aspirations of angels to burn in the hearts of swine, and in the brains of animalculæ?

'I do but anticipate inevitable and kindly death by a few ticks of the clock. Dear master, follow my example! Why employ brain and tongue in the bitter industry of robbing your fellow men of delusions which may be lies, but which, at least, are lovely?'

.

When morning came the storm had gone. The summer heavens were clear. The rain-washed earth smiled. The birds sang outside the windows. The sun-kissed flowers sent up a thousand odours to the calling skies. Within lay Smears, his face contorted by the last spasm of pain; his white brow cold with the frost of death.

An enterprising reporter got hold of the letter addressed to Mr. Gifford, and it was published, with somewhat chilling effect, temporarily at least, on that gentleman's audiences. A creed whose final logic is suicide was hardly suited for general use. Mr. Gifford, however, delivered a specially eloquent lecture on 'The Place of Death in Freethought Theology.' It was, he explained, the goal of a race-course; a goal which meant for the winner the prize of an ended race, and a rest for tired limbs.

Mr. Looker, in his capacity of 'Chorus,' privately offered the comment that a race with no other prize than that of its own conclusion was hardly worth running. If suicide, he added, was the logic of the Freethought creed, he regretted that so few believers in that creed had the courage to be logical. Most of them persisted in the most inconsistent fashion, in keeping alive!

The wrong people, too, were consistent. Now, if Mr. Creakles and Mr. Bagges would only act on their own principles, Mr. Looker declared, the new theology would establish a title to human respect hitherto unsuspected !

CHAPTER XXV

AT SEA

A FORTNIGHT after his interview with Kate, Kit found himself on board one of the great Cape liners going southward past the coast of Spain. Behind him was England, with its broken ties and bitter memories ; before him was South Africa, where he hoped to shape a new career, and find, in the strenuous life and fresh companionships of a new land, some kindly nepenthe—some healing medicine—for his sadly wounded life.

The sea itself, for Kit, as a matter of fact proved a medicine. From one point of view he was, it is true, very ill-equipped for reading the secret of the sea. He had no gleam of the poet's brooding imagination, and nothing of the artist's quick sensibilities. But the sea, with its blowing airs, its wide horizons, its stinging freshness, was a delight to his senses and a spur to his brain. He felt, dimly, it had a message for him ; something which nothing else in nature—not stream, nor hill, nor sky, nor leafy forest—could utter, and which, at first, baffled his intelligence. The far-stretching, immeasurable, and heaving floor was a divine manuscript, scribbled over with hieroglyphics to which he had no key.

The sea has a twofold beauty, a beauty of colour and of form; and it was, perhaps, natural that to Kit's intellect, strong on the mechanical and scientific side, the sea first of all appealed by its beauty of form. His eye followed, with tireless delight, the clear curve of the skyline—a circle drawn as if by infinite compasses—the changing surfaces of the swinging waves. As he studied their ever-changing angles, flinging off the light as though they were living and fluid crystals, he understood the meaning of that fine phrase in the Psalms: '*The floods clap their hands.*'

The loneliness of the ocean, too, crept into Kit's mind, and seemed to fit his half-bitter mood. Who wishes to know what loneliness means must wander into the desolate chambers of the sea. Here were measureless leagues of silent, empty space, stretching north and south and east and west; from Cape Verde to the West Indies, from the North Pole almost to the South Pole. The sun rises on one empty horizon, and sets on another. No gleam of white sail, no stain of purple, far-off peak breaks the clear skyline. The ship seems to float, a tiny, murmuring shell, in the silent and empty vastness of the ocean.

What may be called the paradox of the sea, again, curiously pricked Kit's intellect. The wind-blown waves seem a picture of tumult, and of mindless caprice. No order binds the vagrant drops into unity; no thread of law links them into coherence. And yet Kit, looking at the curving waves with the trained eye of an engineer, realized the order underlying this mask of seeming caprice.

One Sunday morning, standing in the bows of the huge steamship, he watched the great knife-like stem ripping its way through the purple silk of the sea-

floor. Twin plumes of white spray leaped up into the air as the great iron stem tore the yielding water; and the sunlight, smiting through the two white fast-travelling pillars of spray, changed them into tiny rainbows, a double arch of disintegrated light! And onward, at the speed of a railway train, the great ship ran, with that perfect and exquisite, though broken, arch of untwisted light at its lip. The fidelity, the swiftness, the certainty with which each of those rushing jets of wind-blown spray obeyed the law of its structure, and disintegrated the light that smote it, changing the white rays into a many-coloured rainbow, delighted Kit's scientifically trained mind. It was the revelation of a law that was woven through every atom of the vagrant deep. And behind that law was, surely, a personal, all-controlling Intelligence.

Only later did the pure beauty of the sea—the beauty of rich tint and changing shade—creep into Kit's imagination. He realized it was a mirror, reflecting every mood of the sky. By day, under the radiant skies, it was clad in royal purple; it wore an aspect of effervescing and tumultuous life. When night drew on, the purple deepened into blackness; then the blackness itself became a second and dusky firmament, reflecting the star-sown deeps of space above. Nay, the night-sea burned with its own strange fires. Phosphorescent sea-flames kindled in its depths. The stem of the great boat flung off diverging lines of foam, and through the soft and creamy foam broke a thousand points of heliotrope-coloured flame. Every curve of the sea became flame-edged. Every wave blossomed into stars.

So Kit began to realize the great truth that beauty is, with God, no costly and grudging element. It is

the common stuff of which He has made His worlds. He is the great world-artist, who shapes the pattern of every leaf, and mingles the colours for every flower, and sets the glittering stars to a pattern of splendour in the deep heavens. And He who pours the purple into the cup of a violet pours a purple as rich, but in volume beyond all measure, into the mighty cup of the sea.

Beauty, set in spaces so remote from him, and seen so rarely by human eyes, man is tempted, in his egotism, to think unnecessary, or even wasted. If he be not present he thinks God will have no spectator ! But the sea is, for man, the great teacher of humility. Far beyond the tiny circle of his vision runs the glittering and purple mosaic of its vast floor. And everywhere the waves chant their song. Everywhere the sunsets come and go. Still, night after night, the great mirror of the sea reflects the stars, though no wandering ship breaks the skyline. What matters it that man is dumb, or blind, or missing ? *'All Thy works praise Thee, O God.'* *'God's way is in the sea, and His wonders in the great deep.'*

So the sea was something more than an artistic education to Kit. It proved a moral discipline.

But Kit had not enough of the artist, or of the philosopher, to find contentment with merely brooding over the changing aspects of nature. His fellow creatures attracted him. And the human landscape of the ship, he quickly realized, had some unpleasant elements. Amongst the passengers were some who contrived to add considerably to Kit's discomfort.

Opposite to him sat a young Boer, returning to the Transvaal from a European visit. He was a giant

in stature, his dress heavy with jewellery, his big head crowned with a tangle of wilful hair, his eyes sulky and menacing. He was a gross eater, had a loud and guttural voice, and drank much more than was wholesome for him. Beside him, his constant companion, was a little fair-haired Hollander named Jeppe; sly, clever, malicious, plainly the evil genius of young Wilmann—the Boer we have described—and yet more than half afraid of him. The quiet, sad-browed young Englishman, with his modest ways and courteous fashion of speech, tempted the pair opposite to continual insult.

Wilmann blustered at poor Kit, Jeppe stabbed him with sly sneers. They talked offensively to him; they talked yet more offensively at him. They insisted on discussing Boer politics with him. To wander into such a realm of debate, with such a pair of controversialists, was dangerous; yet to refuse was treated as an insult. And Kit found the sly, clever sneers of the young Hollander at England, and all things English, almost more exasperating than even the loud and arrogant laughter with which young Wilmann endorsed his companion's evil wit.

Kit found some help and relief in a grave-featured man named Van Wyk, a Boer of the older type, who sat beside him at the dinner-table. His brown skin and silver-white hair, the steady eyes—that had looked on peril and death often—gave a curious strength and distinction to his face. He was grave and reticent; and would sit for hours on the deck, reading his big Dutch Bible, speaking to no one. At the table he could exercise, when he chose, a curious restraint on the younger pair opposite him. He would lift his head when they became offensive, look steadily across the

table at them, while his brown eyes seemed to sparkle with fire; then he would growl out a few words in what Kit afterwards found was the Taal; and the huge young Boer would sink into abashed silence, while Jeppe, the Hollander, hastened to offer fluent and suave apologies.

Kit was strangely drawn to the older Boer; and he, in turn, took kindly to the young Englishman.

'Young fellow,' he said to Kit, 'don't pay any attention to that pair opposite. They are bad samples of the two types who are the curse of the Transvaal. Jeppe is a Hollander, without a conscience, and up to his eyebrows in corrupt schemes. Wilmann is a Boer of the third generation; but money has corrupted him. He has lost all the virtues of his stock. He is a fool and Jeppe is a rogue, and both of them are blusterers. But they are dangerous; so keep clear of them.'

But to 'keep clear of them' was difficult. The pair seemed to think that Kit was easy and safe game, and they pursued him with gross wit. The smoking-saloon naturally gave them their best opportunities.

'Englishman,' said Wilmann to him, abruptly, one day, as they sat in the smoking-saloon, 'what do you want in South Africa? There are too many Englishmen across the Vaal already.'

'There will be fewer of them there soon,' said Jeppe, with a satirical grin.

'Africa is for the Africander,' Wilmann went on arrogantly. 'We will give you Englishmen room to lie underneath the soil; but there is no room for you on top of it. I helped to put some underneath the grass myself, and mean to put some more there. I was at Doorn Kop, where we ran Jameson to earth. I drew

a bead on Jameson myself, and it was the only time that day I missed. I didn't miss the others!' he added, with an unpleasant laugh.

'My father was at Bronkhurst Spruit,' he continued. 'How they shot the rooineks down that day! Our men lay in the long grass, while the redcoats stood in line on the road, and they shot them like rabbits. The fools! Their guns were in the carts.'

'Was war proclaimed then?' asked Kit. To shoot down unsuspecting men in peace was certainly murder.'

Wilmann broke out into a jeering, triumphant laugh:

'Why should we give them warning? The vierklaeur,' he cried, 'is going to fly from Zambesi to Cape Town. We will whip you Englishmen out of the country with our sjamboks.'

'Perhaps so,' replied Kit quietly; 'but when the whipping begins strange things may happen.'

'We'll crush you,' pursued the young Boer, stretching out his huge hand, and closing it energetically, 'we'll crush you like a rhea-fowl's egg.'

Just then, Van Wyk, who had been listening, came up, and Wilmann and Jeppe moved off hurriedly.

'They talk like fools,' said the old Boer grimly. 'It will be an ill day for both races when fighting breaks out on the Vaal again. I was at Ingogo and at Majuba. The rooineks are brave enough. It was a brave thing to seize the hill in the night, and they would have held it in spite of us if the officers had shown common sense. But they were blinded that day. There was no leadership. The British general was mad. But the rooineks can fight. Those fools,' he went on, pointing with a gesture to the pair,

who now sat on the other side of the smoking-saloon — 'those fools think they can drive the British out of South Africa, and they will destroy the two Republics in trying to do it'; and the old Boer puffed savagely at his pipe. 'One is as sly as a fox,' pursued the old man; 'the other is as stupid as a baboon.'

'You were at Majuba?' asked Kit. 'That was a brave deed by your people. There is nothing braver in the history of war.'

'Ah, it was brave enough! But God put it into our blood to do it that day.'

The old Boer sat looking into space. Plainly, what he saw was not the sunlit deck, the grey sea before him, but that grim hill far off, under the African sky, up whose stony flank he had climbed with his comrades, on the morning when the men of his race did one of the memorable deeds of history.

'Yes,' he went on, 'it was a brave thing to seize the hill. We held it in the daytime, but drew off our scouts at night; and after our men had left it the English, somehow, in a night-march, of which we had never dreamed, seized it. Our camp and our entrenchments lay at their mercy.

'I was the first to see them on the hill. I was lighting my fire just as the sun rose; and, looking up, I saw, against the skyline, more than twenty rooineks on Majuba. The fools! They had set the trap, and they could not keep themselves hidden till our patrol walked into it! Many of us were for moving off at once; for if the English had guns on Majuba they could shoot us down as they liked. But the cornets resolved to attack. We had beaten the English at Laing's Nek and at Ingogo, and we thought we could

always beat them. But God put it into our hearts! He led us that day. Nikolas Smidt was our captain; he was my friend and neighbour, and was a grand fighter. But it was God,' he repeated, 'who led us that day'; and again the old man sank into a reverie.

'Some of our men lay in the grass,' he proceeded, 'and swept the crest of the hill with their bullets; while we, the storming party, crept up through rocks and brushwood. The English general threw out no skirmishers. He had dug no trench; he had built no schanzes, or they were only toy schanzes and built in the wrong places. They didn't command the slope of the hill up which we climbed. The party I was with crawled through scrub and rocks up to a steep kopje on our right, held by men in kilts. They were firing at some of our men to their right, and never saw us. We crept to within eighty yards of them, and could see them above us against the sky. I counted them. There were just sixteen, with a young officer; and we were sixty! Their fire swept the naked edge of the hill across which our stormers must run; but they never saw us.

'Our cornet would not let us shoot singly. He made us fire one dreadful volley, a volley from sixty rifles into sixteen men, not eighty yards distant! The volley smashed up the whole party! The line of the British near ran back, and we seized the kopje, with the dead Highlanders lying on the rocks. I counted ten bullet wounds in the young officer's body, and any one of them would have killed. Our rifles from where we stood covered the naked edge of the hill. Below, in the brushwood, lay our men, firing fast and hard. Above was a line of broken rocks, held by the rooineks.

They were firing over the heads of our men. When we examined their rifles after the fight they were all sighted for five hundred yards ; and there wasn't fifty yards betwixt the two lines ! If they had rushed down the slope with their bayonets our men must have been destroyed.

'From the kopje we could see the English fix their bayonets. I had crept forward and I could hear the English officers calling out, in high voices, "Ninety-second," "Fifty-eighth," "Naval Brigade." But, somehow, no one gave the order to charge. I saw an officer run up to the English general and point to the bushes where our men lay firing. He wanted the order to charge, but the general shook his head. That shake of his head lost the English Majuba.

'At either end of the line, by this time, we had seized the kopjes, and we shot the poor rooineks down fast. They stood in a crowd together, and our bullets killed double. At last a cry went up, such as I never heard in a fight before or since. It was the cry of brave men giving way to panic ! They broke up ; then went back in little waves. Our line ran forward. Then they were at our mercy ! We held the edge of the basin ; they were below us, in a mass. It was a pit of death for them, and we shot them down as we pleased. Then they ran. They climbed the further slope of the basin, while we stood and shot them. They leaped over the edge of the cliff.' Here Van Wyk's eyes lit up ; his voice rose. The old Boer was looking once more in imagination on the wild scene.

'One tall man stood in the open when the line broke and fled. It was the English general. He was a brave man. He never turned or lifted a hand, but looked at us as we came charging down into the little

valley. One of the Boers—it was my neighbour, Hans Vermaak—lifted his rifle and shot him, and he fell on his face and never moved. But he was a brave man.

‘It was a great day and a great deed,’ Van Wyk went on. ‘The English could have held Majuba against us for ever if they had known the ground ; if they had entrenched ; if they had held the edge of the hill or had sent out a skirmishing line to occupy the rocks below the crest ; if they had held the kopjes on either flank. Or if they had only run in on us with the bayonet when we came to the crest of the hill, we must have failed. But God blinded them ! He fought for us. He meant us to be a nation, and He gave us the victory that day. But He never meant us to come to *that*,’ said Van Wyk, pointing to the unlovely pair opposite to them. ‘Gold has corrupted us. We are not the oppressed ; we are oppressors. We have flung away our chance. There will be no Majuba Hill again ; unless,’ he added after a pause, ‘it is on the English side.

‘Those two,’ he went on, ‘have been buying big guns and ammunition in Germany. But big guns won’t save us if God is not with us.’

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In the deck games got up to lighten the dullness of the long days, Kit’s quickness of eye, perfect balance of limb, and training as an athlete, gave him the lead. But in mere contests of brute strength the young Boer’s huge stature and brawny limbs enabled him to overthrow all competitors.

Kit, warned by Van Wyk, avoided any contest with Wilmann.

‘He is twice your weight,’ said the old man, ‘and he will play you an evil turn.’

Kit acted on this advice, though at some cost to his own feelings. ‘It is odd,’ he thought, ‘if I could not capsize that huge mass of beer-sodden flesh.’

The young Boer challenged any one in the ship to one simple test of strength. The competitors sat on opposite sides of the table; their right elbows touched; each clasped the other’s uplifted hand, and strove to force back his arm. It was a direct contest of strength of wrist and arm, and Wilmann’s mighty limb bore down one competitor after another, in some cases injuring them severely.

‘Don’t try that test with him,’ whispered Van Wyk to Kit. ‘He is stronger than you, and he has a trick which might break your wrist. He will certainly do you an evil turn.’

But Kit found the loud and arrogant challenge that Wilmann flung him across the deck intolerable. He accepted the challenge with a laugh, and the pair sat down on either side of the table.

Wilmann clasped Kit’s palm in his huge fingers, put his whole strength into a thrust, and suddenly tried to twist the Englishman’s hand round. He meant to break or dislocate his wrist.

But Kit knew the trick. Wilmann, to his astonishment, felt the Englishman’s hand shut upon his huge, fleshy fingers as though it was steel. The Englishman’s eyes flashed into his with a sudden fire that cowed him. He felt his wrist turn, and knew he was in his opponent’s power. Another turn and his wrist must be dislocated.

Suddenly Kit’s hand relaxed, Wilmann’s huge fingers dropped limply down.

'We might hurt each other,' said Kit coolly. 'We had better not try any more.'

Wilmann ruefully stroked his huge hand and wrist, and looked in amazement at his opponent. Then he broke out into deep and guttural oaths. Kit looked at him with steady scorn for a moment, and then rose and walked away.

The incident naturally led to trouble, and the trouble suddenly took a shape that Kit found very trying. As he came into the smoking-saloon the next morning he found Jeppe and Wilmann, with their heads close together, bent over an old newspaper; Jeppe, with his finger, was guiding the young Boer's eyes down the column. The Hollander lifted his head as Kit came in, and flashed at him an evil and triumphant glance. He nudged the Boer, who lifted his big head and stared insolently at Kit.

'I know, Englishman,' he said, 'why you go to South Africa. You dare not stay in England! But what do you think we do with bank robbers in the Vaal?' and he pointed with his huge forefinger at the paper before him.

Kit stared at the pair. Some evil chance had thrown into their hands an account of the case in the magistrate's court at Middleford. As he still stared, with white face, compressed lips, and flashing eyes, at the two men, Wilmann broke into a slow, deep laugh, a laugh so full of insolence that Kit's blood took fire. He took one light, quick step forward, and there was such a look of battle in the set of his head, and the poise of his clenched fists, that Jeppe stepped hurriedly behind his big comrade.

'I don't fight a thief,' said Wilmann coolly; so coolly, indeed, that Kit paused.

‘If you have read that story,’ Kit said, pointing to the newspaper, ‘you know that the charge against me was dismissed. And if you call me “thief” again,’ he added grimly, ‘big as you are, I’ll knock you down!’

The young Boer still stared at him insolently, but he did not repeat the offensive epithet; and, after lingering sternly for a moment, Kit turned on his heel and walked away.

But the story spread, and Kit found himself a sort of social outcast. Van Wyk alone stood loyally by him. He listened to Kit’s tale, and, at its close, thrust out his brown hand, and, for the first time, shook hands with him.

‘I know an honest man when I see him,’ he said briefly. ‘You will not mend this matter by fighting anybody. You must just bear it.’

The whole incident drove Kit afresh into solitude. He had to find what companionship he could in the sea itself. He grew tired of the idle chatter of the smoking-saloon; but his ears never wearied of the deep monotone of—

The strongest of Creation’s sons,
That rolls the wild, profound, eternal bass
In Nature’s anthem.

Nature, he felt bitterly, was kinder to him than man.

Sea-life, as a matter of fact, usually serves to bring out an ignoble side of human nature. It is idle. It is emptied of all serious duties. Every wholesome law of habit is broken. A curious grossness of appetite is developed; a curious sloth of brain and conscience. Existence is resolved into a round of foolish games,

of yet more foolish chat, and of too much eating and drinking.

And yet, judged by many of its conditions, life at sea ought to be even more serious in tone, and nobler in temper, than life ashore. It is set in a frame so august; such new perils cast their shadow on it! The sea is so vast, so restless, so lonely. It is a huge, grey, swinging floor, stretching empty and awful to where grey sea and blue sky meet. In the centre of that mighty, curving horizon tosses the ship; a tiny metal shell with its fiery heart of roaring furnaces, its pulse of throbbing machinery, its freight of close-packed human lives. At night, with the lonely stars above and the lonely sea beneath, the great ship seems, to the brooding imagination, to float as on the very bosom of eternity.

How vast are the forces, how wide and lonely the spaces, of Nature! How little is man! How near is death! The rending of a mere skin of metal, and the great ship, with its crowded lives, would sink like a stone, and leave no scar on the elastic waters!

Kit found pleasure in pacing the lonely deck at midnight: the officer walking to and fro on the bridge; the furnaces roaring faintly at the heart of the ship; but all else silent. The sea itself was a mere liquid darkness; and the night lay upon it like a shadow on a deeper shadow. The stars shone, steadfast, innumerable, with an aspect both of multitude and of remoteness and depth, such as they never wear when seen from the solid earth. And on through the silence and the darkness, with measureless depths all black beneath, and gleaming heights of star-sown space above, the great ship moves like some

living thing with its freight of slumbering lives. They are being carried over the depths they cannot fathom, along a track they cannot see, and by forces they do not in the least understand. And yet they sleep, dreamless and unconcerned! Strange, Kit reflected, that men who trust God so little should trust each other so much!

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PRICK OF GOD'S SPEAR

LIFE has many tests for creeds and characters; but death is the final solvent. It 'holds the keys of all the creeds,' in the sense that it tests them all. The touch of its chilly fingers is the prick of Ithuriel's spear—or, rather, of God's spear. The keen yet merciful steel, just at this period, pricked Mr. Gifford's philosophy at a very sensitive spot.

A malignant epidemic, bred in the slums of Middleford, and quickened by the summer heats, was creeping through the town and breathing its taint on even the wide and pleasant suburbs. Many a new-dug grave in the cemetery bore mute witness to its ravages. One of the victims was little Mary Gifford; a dainty maiden, some ten years old, whose light footsteps made the music of the house, and whose laughing face was its sunshine.

Mary had drooped like a dying flower for some weeks; then the deadly fever awoke in her veins, raced through her blood, drowsed her brain, crept to her heart. Slender, sensitive, fragile, the child lacked stamina to resist a virus so malignant; and she was visibly dying.

She was lying in bed, a fragile little figure, with head moving ceaselessly to and fro. Her bright

eyes shone with feverish light; her lips were scarlet, as though moistened with blood; her little forehead was scribbled over with hieroglyphics of pain; her breath came and went in hurried and broken pantings. She talked—or, rather, whispered—incessantly, for fever was in her brain.

By her side sat her mother, her face white with watching, her eyes heavy with grief. From the next room came the sound of her husband's steps, walking tirelessly to and fro.

'Mamma dear,' whispered the dying child, 'do you remember the hymn they sang at Jessie Blunt's grave? It was:

'Jesu, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high:
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
Till the storm of life be past!
Safe into the haven guide,
O receive my soul at last!

'You never taught me that hymn, mamma, but I know it; I know every word of it. "Jesu, Lover of my soul,"' recited the thin lips, over and over again.

Then came a pause.

'Mamma,' she went on, with suddenly knitted brow and eagerly questioning eyes, 'doesn't Jesus love me too? I think He does, mamma dear,' she whispered, with a sudden drop of her voice, and a shy, sweet smile. 'For, do you know, I used to pray to Him before I went to sleep, though you didn't know. Does it make you angry, mamma?'

Mrs. Gifford shook her head, with a wan smile.

'I'm sure,' the child whispered, with the same odd

hush in her voice, 'He loves me. Don't you think He does?' she insisted. 'Is it wrong to pray to Him? Jessie used to pray to Him. Her mother taught her. Mamma,' she suddenly demanded, 'why didn't you teach me?'

What could the poor mother say? She could only kiss passionately her dying child's brow, while her own breast shook with bitter sobs. She had no whisper of comfort for the child, in whose stead she would gladly have died. Her frozen lips frightened even herself. The ghost of her own half-forgotten creed, the creed of her youth, awoke in the cells of her memory; a sort of despairing vision of what she had once believed, and believed no longer, swept over her.

But she quickly forgot herself, and thought only of her child. Was there, indeed, no loving and gentle Saviour, who would go with her child on the dark and echoing way of death? That hope was only a lie that tricked human hearts. But would to God it were true? It would be more precious than gold! Her later belief, she suddenly realized, was a creed that might suit full pockets, and healthy blood, and sunny hours. But it left grief without a solace; it could cast no light on the dim and lonely way of death. Had her child, indeed, no Saviour, the Friend and Lover of little children, whose tender hands could stretch through the awful distances and shadows of death, where even a mother's hands must fail?

But now her child's voice plucked her out of that maze of wild thoughts.

'Mustn't I pray to Jesus, mamma?' she was asking, with half-fretful insistence.

'Yes, dear, yes! Lord Christ!' cried the grief-bewildered mother, in her distraction, 'Whoever thou art, help me!'

'Mamma dear,' began little Mary again, her thoughts running obstinately in one groove, 'in Jessie's Testament I read that Jesus said, "Suffer little children to come unto Me." Do you think if I went with the other children, He would take me? It wouldn't be like Him if He sent me away, mamma, would it?' and she smiled, with a half-laughing joy which broke the mother's heart to see.

'When Jessie died,' continued the child—herself, alas! now dying—'don't you remember?—she said she would be sure to see her little sister Grace. Shall I see our little Harold, mamma?' suddenly recalling the name of a long-dead little brother. 'And oh, mamma dear, shall I see you? Won't you come to me?' and she broke into a passion of sobbing, and clung to her mother, as there fell on her imagination the terror of death's loneliness, of death as a separating blackness.

'Perhaps papa can tell me about Jesus?' she went on.

But her father had already fled from the intolerable anguish of his child's dying face, and strange, persistent questions. He sat now in his study, before the empty fireplace, his head buried in his hands, and a pang, sharper than the kiss of flame or the stab of steel, piercing his heart. What a gate of suffering love itself could be he never realized till he saw his little child torn with a pain he could not soothe, and for which there was no healing. And what turned his child's thoughts, by a spell so resistless, into a channel so strange? Was this part of God's con-

troversy with him ; God's way of piercing the veil which, with his own hands, he had hung over the Divine Face? What strange instinct, too, was it which made the spirit of a little child, in the blackness of 'the shadow feared of man,' turn to the discredited superstition of the Jesus of the Gospels? Was that dim, childish instinct wiser than his science? Did it pierce deeper into the mystery, and see with clearer vision? He thought of Kipling's lines :

God's mercy is upon the young,
God's wisdom in the baby tongue,
That fears not anything.

No! A thousand times, no! The luminous teaching of reason was more than the wandering visions of a dying child's brain. Yet how dare he pluck from his child's hand this one hope, which, after all, might have reality behind it? It was certain he could himself give no other. If the Figure of Christ was only a myth, bred of the disordered human imagination—the birth of dark ages and of dark minds—yet, somehow, it wore a fairer face, it was of a diviner stature and more radiant brow, than anything else reason or science revealed.

On the platform and before a crowd Mr. Gifford found the exposition of his creed easy enough ; but in the presence of a lonely and dying child his faith, he realized with amazement, had neither message nor office. And the child at whose bedside he had stood with frozen lips was his own! So a great doubt began to whisper in Mr. Gifford's brain. There might be a Christ. Perhaps all the saints were not wrong, and all the rogues right! There might be a Christ. Could he refuse his child that chance?

At that moment the door opened, and Mrs. Gifford entered, wild with an anguish which wrote strange lines on her face.

'Oh, Frank,' she cried, 'I can't bear it. Mary is dying, is dying, and she talks of nothing but Jesus. And we have taken Him from her,' she went on with rising voice. Then, falling into a heart-breaking whisper, 'Why doesn't He exist?' she asked. 'Have you nothing to say to her? She asked me to pray for her; and—wretched mother that I am!—I have no God to pray to! Will you come and pray, just to soothe her?'

'God help us!' said the wretched father, falling back unconsciously on the speech of his earlier days; 'what would prayer do for her or for us?'

'Frank, we are wrong! There must be a Jesus somewhere, to love and help our little Mary. I can't bear her questions. Don't be angry with me, dear; I must send for Mr. Walton. Mary wants him: how can we deny her? Perhaps he can help her; we can't.'

'You must do as you like,' said the unhappy father.

But Mr. Walton, on being sent for, was found to be absent; some hours must elapse before he returned. And slowly, for the sick child and the heart-broken mother, the long hours of the afternoon crept past, and the shadows of the evening began to fall.

While they waited, John Blunt was announced. His bluff good-nature had made him a favourite with the children, and his little daughter Jess had been Mary's chief playmate; and so he must be called into the room.

Mr. Blunt, I am dying,' said Mary, with labouring

breath; for in the consciousness of that fact she seemed to feel herself clothed with a pathetic and quite unaccustomed dignity. 'I shall see Jessie; don't you think I shall, Mr. Blunt?'

The sweat broke out thick on John Blunt's brow as he found himself thus appealed to as an authority on the mysteries of the next world. Then the supreme and perpetual question of poor little Mary's heart found speech.

'Don't you think Jesus loves me, as He did your Jessie? He did love Jessie, didn't He, Mr. Blunt?'

John took refuge in generalities.

'Every one loves you, Mary dear,' he said.

'Ah! but no one can help me now, but Jesus! The Bible says, "Jesus called a little child unto Him"; you know, that's on the gravestone of your little boy'—the epitaph belonged, it is needless to say, to the days when his new creed had not yet illumined John Blunt's mind with its dry and uncomfortable light! 'Is Jesus calling me, Mr. Blunt? He called Jessie, didn't He?' and the child waited for an answer, exploring with eyes preternaturally bright John Blunt's honest face, down which the unashamed tears were now running.

Mr. Blunt lapsed into his native dialect.

'Eh, child,' he said, 'if there isna a heaven for such as thou and little Jess, there ought to be!'

'Will you pray with me, as the minister did with Jessie?' asked Mary; adding in a confidential whisper, 'papa won't.'

'Ah, lassie,' said John, 'I cannot. Oh, Mary, woman,' he went on, calling on his wife, lying for long years in her grave, 'why did ye leave us?'

How he got out of the room, John Blunt couldn't

tell. At the door he met Mr. Creakles, the secretary of the Association, evidently full of some serious business.

'Mr. Blunt,' he said, with an air of importance, 'I understand that our president's daughter is either dying or dead; and this is a great opportunity for us. A good deal of sympathy will be felt for the parents; and don't you think this might be utilized for the Cause? I am sure you will agree with me that this is a chance not to be lost. We ought to seize the occasion to show the advantages of our system. Suppose, for example, we had an impressive funeral, and got Mr. Ripper down from London to deliver his famous address on "Heaven an Exploded Superstition." It would have a good effect, don't you think?'

Mr. Blunt stared at the little wizen-faced, hawk-nosed man, as though he saw his new creed in breeches, coat, and spectacles before him, and didn't exactly enjoy the vision.

'The Association,' Mr. Creakles went on, 'might, as a mark of respect, put up a headstone for the little girl. It wouldn't cost very much, and we could put an appropriate and suggestive epitaph upon it. I don't remember, curiously enough, any epitaph that does justice to our views; but,' he added, with a smirk of conscious pride, 'I have just drafted a little thing of my own, which, I think, would meet the ideas of all our people.'

He pulled out of his breast-pocket a couple of sheets of notepaper, and proceeded to read.

'What do you think of this, Mr. Blunt?—

"Here lie certain ounces of charcoal and lime, which formerly constituted Mary Gifford (daughter of Frank

Gifford, president of the Freethought Association of this town), who emerged from a state of protoplasm"—I don't know the exact date,' explained Mr. Creakles—"was nurtured in the glorious doctrines of Freethought, and lapsed into carbon on——"—we needn't put in the date just yet.

'I think,' said the author of this remarkable epitaph, contemplating it with a critical air, 'that ought to be satisfactory. There is nothing bigoted or illiberal about *that*. It's thoroughgoing. It's strictly scientific. A bit of Latin would, perhaps, give a scholarly touch to it; but I'm not strong in Latin. I've looked up the dictionary, though, and I think "ex nihilo nihil" might do, or what would you say to "Requiescat in carbone"? I am not quite sure of the Latin, but I rather think there is a touch of originality about that.'

'You might at least,' said John Blunt, with a bluntness of double intensity, 'keep your epitaphs till the child is dead.'

'But we must be prepared,' remonstrated Mr. Creakles. 'Now, about the address at the grave. If Mr. Ripper can't come, and Mr. Gifford himself is unable to give it, I think the Association will expect you to take his place.'

'Confound the Association!' said Mr. Blunt, as he broke away.

By this time the message had reached Mr. Walton, and he quickly stood by the dying child. Mr. Walton was no dialectician. He could not prove his creed by logic. In the wrangle of the critics over the Bible he took little part; but at the bedside of the dying he was without a peer. His faith moved in a realm beyond the reach of debate. He was Christ's messenger, stooping over one of Christ's little ones.

How sweetly, on the panting little heart, labouring to the end of its task, fell—syllable by syllable—like falling dew on flowers, the story of Christ. It needed no proof! Love has its own credentials!

So the immortal story fell from Mr. Walton's lips: how Jesus Christ Himself, the Eternal Son of God, had become a little child; had lived through the span of human life; had died, carrying the burden of all human sin; had risen from death, triumphant, and had opened the kingdom of heaven to all who loved Him. How He was God, and revealed God. How He still lived, and was there by the bed, in the little room, holding the fevered hand, guiding the stumbling feet. How, to those who loved Christ, death was not darkness, but light; not sunset and night, but dawn and the day; how the shining gates of heaven were just beyond the shadow, and the face of Christ brighter than even the gates of pearl. And then what a company was waiting there to meet the delivered and redeemed spirit: all the loved and pure of all the ages!

'Oh, mamma,' said Mary, while the tears ran like rain down her cheeks, 'didn't you know this? Why didn't you tell me yourself?'

CHAPTER XXVII

ON TALANA HILL

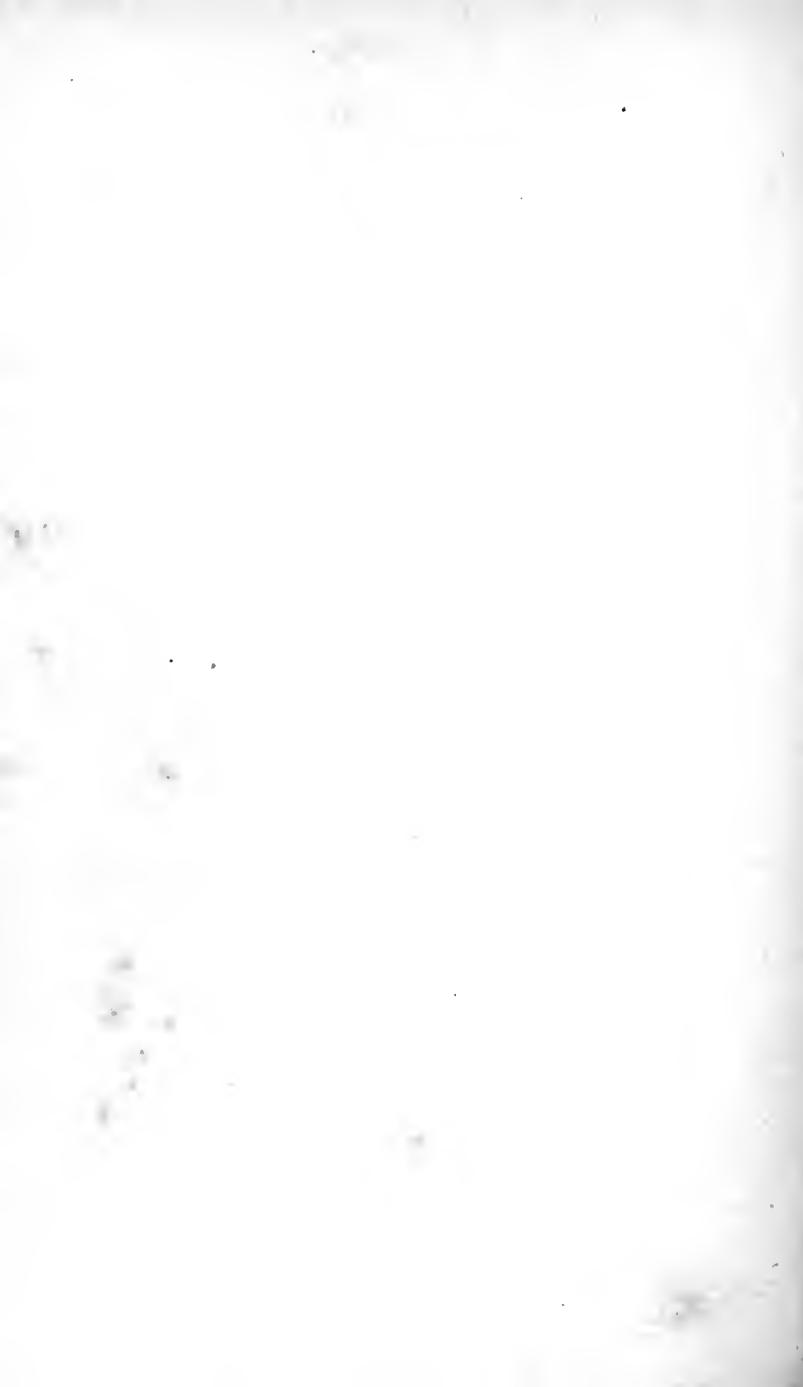
KIT'S first days in South Africa were days of heart-ache, of home-sickness, and of hard work. But work, for the healthy mind, is a tonic ; duty is a medicine ; and though a new gravity stole into Kit's face, and deeper lines wrote themselves upon it, yet, in time, a finer and serener peace seemed to shine through it. His features showed, too, a new strength ; a strength bred of sorrow patiently endured, of a great choice manfully sustained.

Boyd, his student chum, was the senior engineer of the mine in which Kit was engaged, and the head of the professional staff. He was a masterful, loud-spoken, energetic man, with flowing beard and irascible grey eyes. He met Kit with a stentorian welcome, which the somewhat sad-hearted young fellow found very pleasant. Boyd had for Kit the affection which is sometimes bred of diversity of temperament and character. He admired him for the qualities which he himself did not possess ; for his cool temper and quiet fashion of speech ; for his unashamed piety ; for his scientific knowledge as an engineer. And Kit, too, brought to him a pleasant breath of England, of old friends, and of old college days.

'You are a little bit of cool England, Kit, dropped



'YOU ARE A LITTLE BIT OF COOL ENGLAND, KIT.'



down in this hot place, and you seem to bring the scent of English valleys and the chatter of English brooks with you.'

Africa had roughened Boyd, but he had towards Kit, bred of old college experiences, an admiration—not unflavoured with envy, and not unvexed, sometimes, with wrath—for Kit's quiet but unshakable steadfastness of character.

His views on the burglary in Middleford, and of Kit's unfortunate entanglement with it, were of a character which tickled Kit's sense of humour, yet curiously soothed him.

'The whole gang of them,' was Boyd's stentorian summary, 'were either fools or rogues—or both. Why, Kit, I don't like your religion over-much; I can do without it well enough myself—or, at least, I can do with a much smaller allowance of it than you find necessary; but, hang it! any one who can suspect you of being tangled up in a burglary proves himself qualified for a lunatic asylum.'

Then his light-grey eyes, that kindled so easily into wrath, shot fire. He turned red-faced with generous wrath.

'By Jove!' he cried, 'I would like to have that detective for a quiet half-hour amongst the kopjes. I'd let light into his thick head!'

Kit's elevated eyebrows rebuked Boyd's expletives.

'It's no use bringing your primness to Africa, Kit,' he laughed. 'The Rand is a bad place for religion. You will have a good deal of pious starch shaken out of you here.'

'Religion is something better than a starch, Boyd,' said Kit pleasantly, 'and it seems to me that—both for one's own sake, and for the sake of other people—

you want religion as badly on the Rand as in any place in the world.'

'No, no, Kit; you are in Africa, not in England, where you can't stir without butting up against a church. When in Rome you must do as the Romans do.'

'That is a cowardly proverb, Boyd, and as mean as it is cowardly! Do you change your principles with your geography?'

'Ah! you are the same old stubborn Kit, I see; but Africa will educate you. Unless, indeed, you hope to educate Africa!'

No; that's too big a contract for me,' laughed Kit; 'but, please God, I will keep my own conscience clean.'

Well! That's a big contract, too,' said Boyd, with a stentorian laugh.

To Kit the sun-filled African landscape was a perpetual feast: the deep, ineffable purity of the sky; the unfenced emptiness of the earth; the tawny sand of the summer river-beds; the olive-grey scrub; the raw, rock-freckled, far-stretching veldt, its yellow grasses mottled—though, alas! too rarely—as with splashes of red ink or of white snow, by crimson-tufted or pure white flowers; the grey-blue hills in the nearer distance, beyond which, like purple battlements against the azure sky, rose the great mountain-ranges.

The human landscape, too, keenly interested him. South Africa, at that moment, was a rough geographical palette, on which all known human tints were splashed—brown Kaffirs, black Hottentots, coffee-tinted Arabs, white Europeans. Was there ever such a witch's cauldron of fermenting nationalities as that offered by the Rand! Sullen Boers, sleek Hollanders, voluble

Frenchmen, guttural-syllabled Germans ; miners from Devon and Cornwall, keen-faced Americans, lean and wiry Australians with fearless eye and frank face.

But on the African landscape at that moment lay, like some fast-darkening eclipse, the shadow of coming war. The Outlander was bitter with the sense of wrong ; the Boer was sullen with strange fears, and half drunk with stranger hopes. Hollander and German and Frenchman were fermenting with anger bred of defeated greed. Then, at the end of the long-drawn-out negotiations, came Mr. Kruger's ultimatum, the instant arrest of all business, the flight seaward of the English !

Kit watched for days that strange spectacle of the depopulation of Johannesburg—a whole city in headlong flight. The Outlanders could stay only by special permits, given scantily, and liable to be withdrawn at any moment. If they stayed, too, it was at the risk of being commandeered and compelled to fight against their own flag. So they fled, abandoning their mines, their city, their wealth. But it was with the hope that they would come back with rifles and Maxims ; and under the shelter of the British flag build a social system in which there would be equal rights for white men, and just laws for black men.

In an Anglo-Saxon community, at such a crisis, the fighting impulse was sure to find ample expression. Companies of volunteers began to crystallize themselves. Many of the miners eagerly joined these. Boyd—who had become Kit's special chum, in spite of their difference in age and their discords of character—took an active part in this movement. His vehement temper and habit of frank, loud speech had made him

in the eyes of the Boer authorities, a 'dangerous' man and he knew he must not stay in Boer territory after war had broken out. He had himself joined a volunteer company; and for all his loudly-proclaimed contempt for Kit's piety, he was eager that his comrade should enlist too.

'Well, old "Stubborn,"' he said—he had revived Kit's ancient college nickname of 'Stubborn,' an epithet given in half-admiring derision of his known steadiness of purpose—'I suppose your religion won't let you fight?'

'That depends on the cause,' replied Kit, with a smile.

'Well, isn't this cause good enough?' asked Boyd roughly. 'The old flag's worth fighting for, and we want to teach these wretched Dutchmen a lesson.'

'Perhaps, for the matter of that, we want to learn some lessons too.'

'Ah, that's your Christianity,' answered Boyd, with conviction. 'It's a poor, tame thing! A religion that makes you take a licking lying down isn't the religion for men.'

'But my religion doesn't teach me that. I think the cause is good, though not quite for your reasons; and I'll enlist.'

'Hang the reasons,' said Boyd heartily. 'I thought you had too much honest English blood in your veins to go sneaking off when every good Englishman ought to stand by his flag.'

Kit, like most men of his race, reached the fighting-point slowly; and he was deeply religious. How far is a Christian, who is not a soldier by profession, justified in taking his rifle and joining in such a bloody business as war? Kit shared all the resentment of his class

against Boer rule. He was perhaps hardly just to it ; but what seemed its ignorance shocked his common sense ; its corruption kindled his scorn. It meant too often injustice to white men, and cruelty to black men. He had watched the flight from Johannesburg, the trains crowded with women and children, moving off not seldom under the jeers and insults of a Boer crowd. The flag of his country was about to be assailed. The first low, deep thunder of coming war was shaking heaven and earth. Could he turn his back on such a scene, and leave other Englishmen to risk their lives for Queen and country ? If he stood aloof, other Englishmen would say—Boyd loudest of all—that religion cut all the sinews of manliness in its subject. It made him, as a citizen, worthless.

But Kit mistrusted this ferment of resentments and emotions in his own breast. They were compounded of strange elements : political convictions, pride of race, dread of human scorn, and the mere animal fighting impulse. At last, like a wise lad, he set the whole matter in the clear, high realm of conscience ; and his duty seemed, almost at a breath, to grow clear to him. He must take his part as an Englishman. He must fight—though without either hate or passion—for the cause of his country. And Kit had one wholesome intellectual characteristic. When he had reached a decision, and his conscience had endorsed it, it was final. It never came up for re-discussion—unless, indeed, new factors emerged.

Some brains never reach finality. They discuss and rediscuss the same question indefinitely, and reach a decision to-day, only to doubt it to-morrow. And the process goes on till the very power of 'making-up' one's mind is lost, or there remains no mind to be 'made

up.' But Kit's brain, though in its cells burned no spark of genius, had, at least, a capacity for reasoned and final decision.

During his early experiences as a volunteer, in the camp, and on the march, Kit came to know the veldt well—neutral-tinted, and pustuled with kopjes; and it bred in him that half-fascinated mood of mingled hate and love which the veldt seldom fails to inspire. Poets make landscapes 'smile'; but no poet could imagine a smile on the face of the veldt. Grey, void, flowerless—save for low-lying patches of white heath, or red dahlias—mystic, illimitable! Grey is not the exact word to express the colour-effect of the African veldt; the colour note is a yellowish-grey, like bleached khaki, the tint of the garb worn by the men who marched and fought on its surface. Yellow the daisies, the hawkweed, the mimosa blossoms; grey the tint of the far-stretching levels of grass; grey the weather-worn rock masses of the kopje. Only where the steel-blue taibosch grows on the lower hill-slopes, or where a vague, curving, elusive line of green marks a river-course, does the fascinated eye escape the dominant note of yellowish-grey.

The veldt is a sea. Sea-like its vastness, sea-like its hard, curving horizon. But it is a grey and melancholy sea, and its [kopjes resemble dismantled ships, of the old haystack kind, mere floating derelicts in a forgotten ocean. What is Africa itself, indeed, but a vast, flat-topped kopje, with infant kopjes innumerable, sprinkled over its stony back!

And above the khaki-tinted veldt rose by day an arch of undimmed blue; by night one of star-sprinkled cobalt. Only where the boundaries of night and day touched, at dawn and at sunset, did the eastern and

western horizon, in turn, burn with a flame of almost intolerable colours. The unrealized vastness of the veldt, with the pure, dry atmosphere in which it is bathed, is the reason why its distances are so illusive. Space, somehow, loses its perspective, distance its scale.

The wild life of the veldt, feathered or furred or scaled, stirred Kit's interest curiously. The red-shanked wood-pigeon in the grass; the crested eagle, a drifting patch of curved and fretted wings, in the blue air; the aasvogel, a grey and feathered appetite—mere hunger armed with beak and claws—floating above the melancholy expanse of the empty landscape; the lizard, clad in mail of shivering bronze, barred and edged with gold, in the hot sand; the locusts, flying before the breath of the hot wind, in air-borne armies uncounted, till the air is thick, and the earth is grey, and space itself is choked with them. The sounds of the veldt, too, grew familiar to Kit's ears: the whistling of the rhea-buck in the scrub; the snapping bark of the baboon in grey and sullen valleys, on which the beetling cliffs looked down; and, sometimes, at night, the deep, triple-booming roar of the lion.

It was a new education for Kit: the toil of the march, the quick obedience of the drill-ground, the rough companionships of the camp-fire, the contact with both nature and human nature in their wildest shapes—all stretched out through weeks.

'Now, Kit,' said Boyd, as the troop of which they were members rode one October afternoon into Symons's camp outside Dundee, 'you are going to have some of your pious notions knocked out of you. Religion may suit a Sunday school, or a prayer-meeting, but it will go to pieces in a campaign. You must leave

it behind you when you are going into the firing line.'

'No,' replied Kit cheerfully. 'That is just where I shall want it most of all. And, though you can't understand it, Boyd, yet I shall be a better soldier with my religion than I could be without it.'

'Tell that to the marines,' said Boyd, with a laugh.

Boyd, it may be explained, found in Kit's 'religion' a fruitful occasion of rather clumsy wit. He expended laborious jests upon it with tireless diligence. But behind all his banter there was an unconfessed and admiring envy. As he looked at Kit, he thought, in his own rough vernacular, 'What a fine fellow he is!' Boyd, himself, was much the more popular and picturesque fighting man of the two. He was bearded like the pard. His loud, frank speech was punctuated with strange oaths. He filled a larger space in the eyes of men than did Kit, with his pleasant face and gentle fashion of speech.

But Kit brought to his new business the gifts of a born cricketer—quick eyes, cool nerves, tireless limbs, lightning-swift decision. He was a good rider, had a fine natural genius for shooting, made deadly by much practice, and a sense of 'locality' which made him an excellent scout. He had, too, that dangerous habit of the Anglo-Saxon: he got quieter and cooler as he reached the fighting-point.

His officers quickly discovered his qualities—and, on Boyd's part, there came into existence a half-unconscious rivalry with Kit. He would show this 'Sunday-school soldier,' he swore softly under his beard, that there was a finer manliness possible without a religion than with it.

The first rough test of battle for the two men came

swiftly. In the grey dawn of October 20, Symons's force—Fusiliers and Rifles, with three batteries of guns—stood in line on the lower slopes of Talana Hill. On the right flank were the 18th Hussars, and some mounted infantry, and with them the little company to which Boyd and Kit belonged. The men were scanning, with eager eyes, the long hill-slope before them, with its carpet of grey-green grass. The hill lifted its crest high in air, with a sudden curve; and through the thinning mist its rounded head began to show, black and sullen. This was the position they were to carry. A lower range, at right angles to the main hill, stretched down to the plain. The fire from it would command the British flank when the advance began.

As the men stood silent, but in loose order, watching the clearing mist and the unfolding landscape, a patch of bright sky became visible, and threw the rounded summit of Talana Hill into sharp relief. Some tiny black specks were seen moving on it. Yet others fretted the skyline. Then came the deep call of a great gun, the long-drawn crescendo of a shell. Talana Hill was speaking! It was held in force, and the Boers were firing!

The British guns dashed to the front, and barked and swore in reply, but it was like a group of terriers answering a bull-dog. The gun on Talana out-ranged and out-bellowed the lighter British artillery.

Presently came a sharp word of command, the troops swung to their left, and at the quick-step marched in one far-stretching column through Dundee. On many a door-step the women stood, to watch, with pitiful eyes, the files of khaki-clad men who, with eager and set faces, were marching at speed to battle. More

than once some motherly woman, made tender by the sight of a boyish face in the ranks, would break into loud weeping, or even throw her arms round the neck of the embarrassed soldier and kiss him !

The hill was to be attacked on its eastern flank. When its foot was reached by the dusty column, there came a brief halt. The men stood at ease, or flung themselves on the grass ; the officers drew together in groups, and studied the slope up which they were to lead their men.

Kit looked with curious eyes at the long, gently curving hillside, with its carpet of yellowish grass, sprinkled with rough stones. On that rough and sloping stage the bloody drama of battle was about to be played ! How the Mauser bullets would scourge that unsheltered hillside ! Half-way up the hill was an oblong plantation ; beyond it rose the rough crest. Death seemed to fling its menacing shadow on the whole hill, from grey foot to black summit !

Kit turned to look at the men near him. Some stood with parted lips and flushed faces ; some were pale, but with firm-shut mouth. But, in all, the eyes seemed to have the same look, an aspect of eager challenge and expectation.

Kit, to his own surprise, was conscious of a curious sense of elation. It was not the ferment of the fighting blood in his veins ; it was exactly the mood into which he had been lifted on the deck of the wrecked ship. He had the sense of being raised out of the commonplace. Great forces were touching him. And beneath all other emotions there ran, like some sweet, strong wine, the exultant consciousness that his life was in the almighty hand of God. The rough and perilous way of duty ran up that hillside, where the

bullets were already tearing the atmosphere with their insistent whisper; and as the word 'duty' framed itself in Kit's brain, somehow there awoke in his memory the echoes of Wordsworth's fine lines:

Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong:
And the most ancient heavens, through thee, are fresh and strong.

Boyd, who stood next him, looked at him queerly. The steadfast, 'lifted' look on Kit's face surprised him.

'Hang this waiting!' said Boyd fretfully; 'why don't they let us go in and get it over?'

'They know what's best,' replied Kit cheerfully.

Just then a stern, quiet word ran along the files from officer to officer. The men fell into their places, the line stiffened itself, the intervals widened, and the advance began.

Steadily, in far extended order, the slender, grey-tinted lines mounted—with a wave-like effect—the hill, while, from front and flank, came the hooting shells, the hail of softly whistling Mauser bullets. But on, without pause or break, flowed the steady lines.

On the left of the advance the track of a water-course furrowed the hillside deeply, and the outer files leaped down and marched betwixt its banks. It proved, however, a treacherous shelter. The Boer rifles swept it from end to end with a deadly fire. Boyd, with a curse, broke at last from his file and clambered up the bank; but Kit swung on, with bent head and set features, and Boyd found time to cast a glance of half-reluctant admiration at his cooler comrade.

The wood was reached, but it, in turn, proved a

delusive shelter. It formed a huge natural target for the enemy's shell-fire, while the tiny Mauser bullets searched it from front to rear with venomous intensity. It was riding up to this wood that the gallant, but ill-fated, Symons was shot. The men were broken in order; many officers had fallen; Fusiliers and Rifles and Dublins were mixed together. But no man looked back. The fierce fighting impulse carried them to the further edge of the little wood; and, lying down in the grass, they scanned with eager eyes the scene before them.

Some four or five hundred yards distant a rough wall ran, like a grey ribbon, across the shoulder of the hill. Above it, and a little beyond it, rose, almost like a battlement, a face of ragged and broken rock, crowned with a grassy slope that ran back in a long, flat curve. Another rough wall ran down at right angles from the main wall, till it almost reached the wood. The ground rose sharply to the right of this wall, and the Boer riflemen, lying amongst the rocks on its edge, swept the face of the hill with a bitter flank fire.

The British guns were by this time pelting the face and summit of the hill with shrapnel, and the fire in front slackened. But the deadly raking fire on the right snapped and spluttered and stung without pause.

There was a sudden call of high, shrill voices: the men gathered themselves for the final rush. An officer ran out, leading, and in single file, or in little groups and clusters, the men followed, stooping, as they ran, under the shelter of the wall on their flank. In this way the wall above was reached and lined with breathless, panting men of all regiments. There was no

formation. Order was gone ; discipline had vanished. Nothing was left but the native, unconquerable fighting impulse ; the eager purpose of the officers to lead ; the stern willingness of the men to follow.

The Boer fire had again kindled to fury. It seemed certain death to lift a head above the wall, so fast and so fiercely the bullets sang in the air. The atmosphere was torn with threads of whistling sound. To lift a hand in that shot-tormented air, it almost seemed, was to have it shattered.

Kit looked round curiously on the scene. Some of the men were jesting roughly ; some silently wiped the sweat, or the blood, from their faces ; others swore, but with no consciousness of their oaths. Many, in crouching attitude, were eagerly peering through the crevices in the wall. One man, near to Kit, daringly lifted his head above the wall, and the next moment fell suddenly, and lay with twitching limbs.

It was, perhaps, a couple of hundred yards to the foot of the kopje. A broken wall of rock rose steeply, girdling the hill as a belt of armour—sorely shattered—might belt the sides of an ironclad. Above the line of rock the actual crest of the hill ran back, a skull-shaped curve of slippery grass. The air, torn by a hail of Mauser bullets from the face of broken rock and the crown of yellow grass, seemed full of rustling whispers. The task was to leap over the wall, race across the space of rock-sown grass, climb the fire-spitting face of the kopje, and storm up the glacial-like slope above ; and all this in the teeth of magazine rifles ! The best soldiers in the world might have turned back from such a task without shame.

But for the men crouching under that wall—Dublin Fusiliers, Irish Fusiliers, Rifles, and a sprinkling of

colonial volunteers—to turn back was the very last thing contemplated. No man so much as looked back! Every face was turned up to that front of rock, with its deadly spray of flying lead. Kit 'was again conscious of the strange exaltation of mood he had known on the deck of the wrecked ship, and at the foot of Talana when the advance began. He looked round and saw everything with strange distinctness: the line of crouching figures, the upturned faces—many of them blood-stained—that scanned the hill-slope before them.

The eager, shifting figures seemed only waiting for the shout and gesture of a leader to fling them forward. Putting his hand on the wall, Kit looked round for some one to lead. Boyd crouched near him—his face sweat-stained and purple, his eyes almost starting out of his head, and flitting to and fro with animal-like quickness. He cast a strange look at Kit. 'What,' he found time to wonder, 'was the secret of the easy coolness of this "Sunday-school soldier"?''

At that moment came the rush. The British officer, whatever his scientific defects, seldom fails in actual and personal leadership. He is, in brief, the best leader of fighting men, for the actual charge, the race has yet produced! A Fusilier officer near Kit put his hand on the top of the wall, and, with a shout, leaped over it. The men nearest to him followed instantly. In a moment the wall, from end to end, was a fresco of leaping, khaki-clad figures. The men were over, and the slope was covered with charging soldiers! Many fell—the Fusilier officer that led, amongst them. But onward swept the human wave. The slope behind was strewn with the bleeding and

the dead, the hill-face in front was edged with stinging fire. But upward, without pause or shrinking, raced the gallant stormers. Light-footed figures were fiercely climbing upon the rocky face. Some paused for a moment at the foot of the glacis-like crown of the hill, till their panting comrades reached them, and then raced up, side by side, with frowning brows and levelled bayonets, to the crest. Amongst these was Kit; and, stumbling over the rocks, his face redder than ever, came Boyd. He gasped when he saw Kit in advance of him, and, with a rush, overtook him. Side by side they ran forward, shouting men on every side.

The Boers were fleeing! That fierce and broken line, edged with threatening steel, that the hail of Mauser bullets could neither daunt nor stop, was too menacing a spectacle for them.

A huge Boer, with rough-bearded face and unkempt hair, turned suddenly in front, lifted his Mauser, and covered the panting Boyd. Before he could fire, Kit's rifle cracked, and the Boer, dropping, his weapon and flinging his arms up convulsively, ran forward a few stumbling steps, and fell heavily. In another moment they were on him, and Boyd vengefully lifted his bayonet. Kit struck it aside.

'Let me kill him,' panted Boyd.

'Don't hit a man when he's down,' said Kit, with a laugh.

Boyd hesitated, and then ran on. But the Boers were in wild retreat; the crest was won.

'Well,' said Boyd, looking with half-grudged admiration at Kit, 'you can play the man, young fellow, in spite of your religion.'

'I can better play it, because of my religion, Boyd,'

Kit answered. 'But don't let us talk theology now. Thank God, we're safe! Here are the wounded, and we must help to get them down to the hospital tents. And we must help these poor wretches,' he added, pointing to a cluster of wounded Boers, 'just as much as our own men.'

'Confound 'em!' was Boyd's comment. Yet he helped Kit to carry Boer after Boer to the spot where the doctors were, by this time, busy.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A PERILOUS MARCH

ON the day after the fight that won Talana Hill the British fell back across the railway. But in their new camp they were shelled by a huge Creusot gun which here, for the first time in war, made its great earth-shaking cough audible. Colonel Yule, who was now in command, explored, with his scouts, the passes which led to Glencoe. If he held that town, he would cover the main line of railway, and could use it himself to fall back on Ladysmith, if pressed.

But the Boers held the passes in strength; Glencoe and the railway were unattainable. A strong commando pouring through Botha's Pass was striking at Yule's rear, and would cut him off from Ladysmith. Only one course was open to the British commander, and he took it promptly. He abandoned his stores and wounded, and marched by Beith and Sunday River for Ladysmith.

The country was broken and rough, the roads were almost impassable, the weather was bitter. Not often in war has there been a sharper trial of soldierly endurance than in that wild seventy-mile march to Ladysmith. On the 23rd Beith was reached; on the 24th the Waschbank was forded; on the 25th Sunday River was crossed.

The last day's march stretched through thirty-four miles. The men splashed along the muddy roads, while the wind-driven rain beat fiercely on them. They were bespattered with mud, faint with hunger and want of sleep, weary with the strain of the four days' march. They had fought and won a battle, had been—most of them—four days without rations, and six nights without rest or quiet sleep.

Far to the west, on October 24, they had heard faintly the guns at Reitfontein, where French was fighting to cover their line of retreat. On the 25th the tiny column White had sent out to meet and, if necessary, assist them, met Yule's outposts, and these were almost indignant that anybody should have imagined they needed 'help'! Steevens, the famous war correspondent, saw Yule's men as they marched into Ladysmith. 'From their grimed hands and heads,' he says, 'you might have judged them half red men, half soot-black. Their feet were huge balls of stratified mud. Eyelids hung heavy over hollow cheeks and pointed cheek-bones. Only the eye remained—the sky-blue, steel-keen, hard, clear, unconquerable English eye—to tell that thirty-two miles without rest, four days without a square meal, six nights—for many—without a stretch of sleep, still found them soldiers at the end.'

But the gallant column left not a few 'missing' behind it, and amongst these were Boyd and Kit. The strain, the hardship, the toil, the scanty, uncertain rations, the blustering winds and incessant rains of that great march did not suit Boyd's temper. He 'went to pieces,' physically and morally, under it. He grumbled and swore and drank. Kit—cooler, younger, with cleaner blood and a finer inspiration—on the

other hand, showed a steadiness and a power of cheerful endurance which drove Boyd to half envy and half hate him.

In the brief halt at Sunday River, about an hour after midnight, the pair were roused and detailed for scouting work. They were selected, Boyd for his experience, and Kit for his steadiness, for a perilous task. There was a drift—or ford—some two miles from where the tired soldiers lay; a track ran westward from it to the railway. It was important to see that no Boer scouts crossed by it and picked up the trail of the column, or it might still be cut off from Ladysmith, and Boyd and Kit were to relieve the men who had kept watch at this point.

The night was black; the rain came and went in furious blasts, and Boyd swore and sulked at the task assigned to them. He could keep his place in the firing line with the best, and charge in a crowd with the foremost; but the 'two-o'clock-in-the-morning courage'—the courage that rain could not damp, nor cold chill, nor solitude and darkness shake—was, at the moment, not his.

The pair splashed on in the darkness for nearly an hour; and, at last, were left, with brief whispered instructions by their officer, on the edge of the stream, which ran black in the night beneath them. Beyond rose, vaguely, in the rain-filled gloom, the hill on the further bank. Neither of the pair had the mechanical discipline of the regular soldier, who stops at the exact spot where his sergeant places him, and never dreams of acting on his own independent judgement. The map they had studied before they left the camp showed, on the further bank, a road running parallel with the river, and crossing, at right angles, that leading down to the drift.

'One of us must watch where the tracks intersect,' said Kit.

But to Boyd's tired frame and shaken nerves the black night, the sighing river, the gloomy, whispering forest beyond, were full of evil portents.

'Hanged if I'll go!' he said.

'But that's the point to be watched,' urged Kit.

'You may go, if you like,' said Boyd querulously.

Kit took the words coolly, as a consent, and, slinging his rifle, made ready to cross.

'I'll pick you up here at daybreak,' he said.

Boyd watched him as he waded into the black, unknown water, stole across, and vanished in the darkness of the farther bank. He shivered and then swore beneath his breath. It affronted his vanity that this gentle-voiced and pleasant-faced lad, the butt of many a rough jest, should do what he—as he confessed frankly to himself—shrank from attempting.

'There's pluck in him,' he muttered. 'His religion hasn't spoiled him after all.'

Boyd began dimly to suspect, indeed, that Kit's religion had, somehow, set a strange flame of courage burning in his blood!

Kit found his way to the ridge, chose a point which commanded both roads, and kept guard with alert senses, and in spite of rain and cold, while the bitter hours went past.

The morning at last showed signs of coming. Grey light filled the skies. The forest seemed to stir mysteriously with life and sound. It was near the time when Kit must fall back, as the column, by this, must have begun its march.

At this moment the faint snap of a broken stick, and then the yet duller sound of a horse's hoof reached

Kit's ear. He listened keenly, crouching lower in the grey scrub, with its rain-wet leaves. Presently a Boer scout came in sight—with broad-brimmed hat, long, unshorn beard, flecked with grey, and bandolier across his chest. He drew up his pony where the roads crossed, and stared down the track that ran to the drift. Then he dismounted, fastened his pony to a tree so that it was hidden by the scrub, and with swinging rifle began to descend the river track. He plainly meant to explore it.

Kit hesitated. He could not let the Boer cross the river; he could not burden himself with a prisoner. He covered the man with his rifle; the foresight rested steadily, a tiny bead, on the broad chest, just below the bandolier. The pressure of a finger and the man would fall!

But Kit could not fire in cold blood. He was both too young a soldier and too much a civilized Englishman to be able to shoot down an unconscious foe. It seemed little better than murder.

The Boer, by this time, was almost abreast of him. Kit stepped out into the open.

'This way, lad,' he cried. 'You can't pass here. Go back! Leave your pony and clear off.'

The Boer turned with a half-leap as Kit's voice reached him; his eyes, with the quickness of a wild beast, flitted to and fro. His hand stole to the lock of his rifle. Kit was watching him keenly.

'Drop that,' he said sharply; adding sternly, 'Off you go.'

The Boer hesitated, but he saw how coolly the Englishman covered him. He grinned what was meant to be a friendly smile, and turned with a gesture of greeting. Kit still watched him intently, with all his

senses alert. His plan was to capture the pony, and this would leave its owner practically harmless. The track curved round a stout tree a short distance ahead, and the Boer, following the bend in the path, was, for a moment, lost to sight.

As his body passed behind the tree, Kit, watching with keenest gaze, caught a glimpse of one foot flung in the air, as its owner whirled suddenly round. He stood, with compressed lips and frowning brow, while the hot blood jumped in his veins. He was taking a deadly risk; but to take cover would be to lose sight of his enemy.

In a moment a black speck stole out on the further side of the tree. It was the muzzle of the Boer's rifle. Still Kit stood moveless, with keenly watching eye. The next instant his rifle came to his shoulder with lightning swiftness, and he fired. He had caught a glimpse of the Boer's shoulder; and the flash of his rifle, by one breathless instant, anticipated the stream of flame from the Boer's gun.

The Boer leaped out into the open, lifted his rifle, and fired again, but the shot flew wide. The next instant he staggered and fell. Kit still stood, with unlifted rifle, watching.

'I thought so,' he muttered, as the body of his antagonist fell heavily. 'It was a quick shot, but at that distance I couldn't miss.'

He strode quietly across, and stooped over the fallen man. The shot, he saw, was fatal. It had entered the right breast, and passed through the body; the red arterial blood was already gushing like a stream from the Boer's mouth and crimsoning his tawny beard.

'I saw you first and didn't drop you,' he said

pitifully, 'when I might have done, and you should have cleared when I told you.'

The dying Boer looked at him with eyes in which hate still burned. Kit stooped over him and put his flask to his lips.

'My poor fellow, you are dying. Pray to God for His mercy.'

A puzzled look came into the Boer's eyes. This hated Englishman had first spared him, had then out-shot him, and now was talking to him with kindly eyes and compassionate voice, as though he had been his own 'predicant.' Kit unbuttoned the rough coat to give relief to the labouring breast of the dying Boer; but as he did so the man stretched himself out with one deep, choking breath, and died.

Kit studied the forest, the dark hillsides beyond, the bisecting tracks, with keen and searching eyes; but nothing stirred. It was plain the Boer had no comrades. He was a solitary scout, perhaps a messenger. At that thought Kit stooped over the body and searched it.

Yes; there was an official-looking letter, written in Dutch, and quite unintelligible to Kit; but he could read the signature. It was signed 'P. Joubert,' the Boer commander-in-chief. Kit put the letter in his breast-pocket; it might prove to be of importance.

He next walked up to the pony, soothed its alarm at the sound of a strange voice, and, leading it, went back to the ford. Their orders were to fall back at sunrise; the column was to move still earlier.

'Well,' asked Boyd eagerly, as Kit clambered up the farther bank of the stream, 'what did you fire at? Where did you get that beast?'

Kit told his story briefly.

'So you got the better of him,' cried Boyd, with an admiring smile. 'Well done, young fellow!'

'Let's be moving,' said Kit; 'the column must have started before this.'

They moved up the slope; but when they gained the ridge which looked down upon the river, they stopped for a few minutes. A faint sound just then seemed to steal through the misty air, and float up from the now hidden river. Both men listened intently.

'Some one's crossing further up the stream,' whispered Boyd.

'Yes,' said Kit, unconsciously taking the lead; 'we must see who it is, and stop them if we can. Come on!' and he moved forward in the direction whence the sound came.

'Hadn't we better clear?' remonstrated Boyd; 'the column will be a long way ahead.'

'But we don't want any Boer scouts to pick up the column, or they may yet head us off from Lady-smith. Let's see who it is.'

With a touch of reluctance Boyd followed. He began to realize that this 'half-parson'—as he sometimes called him—had a strain of endurance, of cool and enterprising courage, beyond him.

They reached a point where the ridge dipped, making a shallow valley, running down to the river.

'Sec,' said Kit quietly, 'there they are. Only three of them.'

The figures were plain enough, riding through some broken timber about six or seven hundred yards distant.

Boyd made no reply, and Kit turned to look at him.

He had fallen on one knee, and, with rifle at shoulder was coolly aiming at the distant group.

‘Don’t shoot, Boyd, till we see if it is necessary.’

‘It’s always necessary to shoot a Dutchman,’ replied Boyd.

At that moment a blinding squall of rain swept over the ridge. Boyd dashed the rain-drops from his face, and peered intently in the direction where the Boers had last been visible.

‘Where are they?’ he grumbled. ‘Why didn’t you let me bag one of them?’

‘They were going north, and, I should judge, were making for Dundee. They will not hit the track of the column.’

‘I would like to have a chance of hitting them,’ growled Boyd.

At that moment the three Boers, on their ponies, came into sight again, showing clearly against a patch of grey and drifting fog.

‘There they are,’ said Boyd eagerly.

He lifted his rifle, and fired two quick shots, then, with a curse, exclaimed:

‘Missed! Why didn’t you fire?’ he demanded, savagely, of his comrade.

‘They are not alone,’ replied Kit, who, with bent head, was listening sharply to some sounds on their left. ‘I hear horses crossing by the ford we have just left. I am afraid your shots will draw them on to our track, and so they will stumble on the column. We must stop them.’

‘Let’s clear,’ urged Boyd impatiently. ‘There’s nearly a dozen of them, and they are mounted, and we are not.’

Kit scarcely heard him. He was intently studying

the wooded slope which ran down to the river. The pair began to move cautiously back in the direction of the first ford ; when, suddenly, some rifles cracked sharply from the trees. Boyd ran forward a few stumbling steps, and then pitched heavily on to the ground.

‘I’m hit,’ he gasped.

CHAPTER XXIX

ONE AGAINST SIX

KIT had flung himself down in the long grass, without replying. After a moment's keen watching he caught sight of a tiny cluster of Boers. They believed they had shot both Englishmen, and were coming on, with more eagerness than caution. Kit's face was stern, as his eye ran along the sights of his rifle. He was a cool and deadly shot; and he was never cooler than at this moment, when he drew a bead on the breast of the huge Boer who led the party. He fired twice in quick succession, and saw two of his enemies fall heavily, while three others, who made up the party, disappeared behind some rocks with great expedition.

Then Kit leaped to his feet, and stooped over his fallen comrade.

Clasp your hands behind my neck, Boyd.'

With a great effort of strength, he lifted the groaning figure in his arms, and, stooping so as to keep himself as much hidden as possible, half walked and half ran towards a patch of broken rocks, which, showing above the yellow, rain-wet grass, seemed to promise shelter.

Just as he reached the rocks there came some shots from the further side of the ridge; but, Kit, still unharmed, was able to lay the wounded man down in com-

parative safety. The bullet, he found, had passed through Boyd's body a little below the heart, and the wound was evidently serious. Kit untwisted the long puttee off his leg, made pads of a couple of handkerchiefs, so as to cover the two wounds made by the entrance and the exit of the bullet, and then used the puttee as a bandage, winding it firmly round the body of the wounded man. Twice during this operation he stopped and listened, sharply peering through the gaps in the rocks, to discover any signs of the Boers. But they had learnt caution. These Englishmen, they had discovered, shot with disconcerting accuracy. Two of their number had already fallen.

But if their losses had made them cautious, they had also made them keen for revenge; and, from either slope of the ridge, three Boers, Mauser in hand, were creeping up warily to the cluster of rocks on the ridge, where the two Englishmen—one of whom, it was clear, was badly wounded—had taken refuge.

Kit, with his single rifle, had to defend his apparently dying comrade against six enemies, creeping up from opposite directions. He might, no doubt, have surrendered; but, somehow, that reflection did not occur to him! And he quickly saw that, in one sense, he had an advantage over his enemies. The group creeping up from the direction of the river had to cross a long, clear rift in the trees, where they must come within sure range of his rifle. And Kit's lips shut with strange grimness as he resolved his enemies should not cross that open space without paying deadly toll. As the Boers were on both sides of the ridge, they could, of course, attack him rear and front at once. But, on the other hand, they could not act in very close concert.

The Boers, confident in their numbers, and in the weakness of their foes, were now moving, with an eagerness too great for caution, through the scrub, and Kit's quick eyes could detect their advance by the shaking undergrowth.

Boyd, at this stage, had recovered from his semi-swoon. His eyes fell on his comrade as he stooped, his rifle grasped in both hands, ready to be brought to his shoulder, his face white and hard, peering fixedly through a gap in the rocks. There was a frown upon his brow, and the air of battle, and of sternness, gave his countenance a quite new look to Boyd's wondering eyes.

At that moment some rifles cracked from the opposite side to that which Kit was watching so intently. One bullet grazed Kit's forehead, tearing a furrow in the soft flesh, and Boyd saw, in an instant, the red blood streaming down over his cheek. But Kit did not even turn his head round to look at the quarter whence the bullets came. As it happened, the wound gave him no shock. All he felt was as if a sharp knife had been drawn lightly across his forehead; and he lifted one hand from his rifle, and wiped the blood that ran hot down his face. But he knew escape or defeat hung on the advance of the other party, and he never turned his eyes from the point he was watching.

Suddenly he brought his rifle to his shoulder; once, twice, thrice—then a fourth time—a stream of white flame poured from its muzzle. Then, to Boyd's astonishment, Kit leaped from the rocks, and, crouching as he ran, disappeared!

He had struck down, with quick and deadly aim, the three Boers who were advancing from the river; then, leaping from the rocks, and keeping below the line

of the ridge, he ran swiftly to another kopje about one hundred and fifty yards distant, and flung himself down amongst its broken rocks. He had practically wiped out the group coming up from the river, and he reckoned that, if he could seize a new and unsuspected position, he would command the flank of the party of Boers creeping up the opposite side of the ridge.

And this was exactly what happened. Kit watched till one broad-hatted figure, wriggling through the yellow grass like some huge black lizard, came clear beneath his rifle. A second came, almost directly afterwards, into sight, this time bare-headed, some fifty yards further on. The next moment Kit gasped silently in surprise, as a third Boer, not more than a hundred yards distant, ran in stooping attitude across a belt of open ground, and fell behind some rocks.

Kit hesitated. He could select his victim; yet to shoot at the unconscious figures was impossible. At that moment the rifle of the Boer furthest off cracked. The Boer nearest Kit followed. The Boer in the centre was holding his fire; but the other two shot quick and savagely at the cluster of rocks. The spectacle of their flashing rifles helped Kit to harden his heart.

He drew a careful bead on the bare-headed figure furthest off, and fired. The rifle fell from the Boer's hands, and the life seemed, in an instant, to slip out of the recumbent body. But Kit had not stopped to watch. He was sure—as only a born marksman could be—of his first shot, and turned his rifle, with lightning-like quickness, on the centre Boer. The man's face had involuntarily turned to look in the direction from which that unseen rifle had cracked; and, as he turned, Kit's second bullet crashed through it.

The third Boer, the one nearest Kit, had flattened himself, for shelter, against the rock at his front, and was quite unconscious that still he lay in plain sight of his enemy. Kit hesitated to kill.

'Drop your rifle,' he shouted to the Boer, 'and stand up.'

At the sudden call of his enemy's voice, the Boer half-leaped to his feet, then stooped, as though to run along the face of the rock, for the purpose of reaching the shelter of its further side. But while he yet half-rose, a bullet, by way of warning, crashed on the face of the rock by his side, starring it with lead, and the cry, 'Drop your rifle!' came still more menacingly from the ridge above him.

The Boer dropped his rifle reluctantly, and stood up. Kit, by this time with levelled rifle, was visible above the rocks. The Boer glanced fiercely down at his gun, but Kit called warningly,

'Move away from that rifle, or I fire.'

The Boer moved sullenly a few steps off, and Kit came with quick steps down the ridge. He took up the fallen rifle, put his foot on the stock, and, with a strong effort, smashed it.

Kit then lifted his eyes and looked at his prisoner. He was dressed in a better style, and was of bigger stature than the ordinary Boer; and as Kit's eyes ran over his figure it seemed curiously familiar. Surely he knew those sulky and threatening eyes, that mass of tangled and wilful hair, framing the fierce face! It was Wilmann! He had last seen him on the deck of the great liner, looking at him with triumphant and threatening eyes; and, with a startled and almost humorous effect, Kit realized the difference of the scene now. They stood on the yellow veldt, the grey, broken kopje above

them, the figures of the two fallen Boers in sight. It was a scene of deadly combat; and Wilmann stood before him, vanquished, disarmed, a prisoner!

'Well, Wilmann,' he said, 'the beating business has begun, but I don't see that you hold the sjambok, after all.'

Wilmann's lower jaw, by this time, had fallen, his mouth was wide open, his eyes seemed starting out of his head. He had recognized the scorned and quiet-spoken Englishman of the smoking-saloon, the patient butt of his insolent wit. He looked at Kit with amazed stare. There was something in his khaki dress, in the rifle in his hand, in the steady, masterful look of his eyes, which told of the soldier; but was it possible that this despised Englishman, of all others, had shot down his comrades, and held him at his mercy?

Wilmann tried to speak, but his words seemed to choke him.

'It is the luck of war, Wilmann,' said Kit, ashamed of the ungenerous taunt he had flung at a beaten enemy. 'It may be your turn next.' But he could not help adding, 'You see, an Englishman can shoot, and you have not yet driven us all down to Simon's Town.'

'But you are on your road there,' answered Wilmann, abruptly, his voice still shaken and guttural with angry astonishment.

'Well, we are falling back, I admit. Meanwhile, let us look to your comrades.'

But he hesitated. His prisoner was dangerous. He was of gigantic stature, and there was menace in those big limbs and frowning eyes. If once those mighty arms got him in their embrace, Kit felt it might go hard with him. And he could see in the Boer's eyes a gleam of unsubdued courage.

'Go first,' he said sharply, taking his rifle in both hands. Wilmann turned, with a sudden glance of disappointment, but without a word, and led the way towards the nearest fallen Boer.

The figure lay on its back, with mouth wide open, the arms extended, the skull shattered. Kit took up and broke the rifle that lay by the dead man's side, and then, with a gesture, signed to his prisoner to walk to the further Boer. He was shot through the body, but was still living and might recover. Kit again took the precaution of breaking the man's rifle, and then stooped over the prostrate figure, examining the course of the bullet.

While he was still stooping, some instinct made him glance up at Wilmann. He was in the act of stepping towards him, his elbows drawn back, his figure bent, his face thrust forward, with battle in every line of it! Another instant, and the Boer would have leaped upon him!

Kit's quickness of eye and hand served him well at that moment. As they walked towards the second Boer, Kit had unloosed the cover of his revolver, and hitched the weapon forward, so as to be directly under his hand. When he caught the vision of Wilmann about to leap on him, he flung himself erect, drew back a step swiftly, and, with the same movement, grasped the butt of his revolver. He flung up his hand, and Wilmann found the tiny, steady tube pointed directly in his face, while Kit's voice, in cool and stern tones, cried:

'Stop! Hold up your hands,' he added, as Wilmann, with a sense that death was at the touch, stood up, his body still shaking with a combination of passion and of arrested purpose.

Put up your hands,' repeated Kit quietly, but with an accent which Wilmann found irresistible. 'Now lie down on your face.'

Wilmann hesitated, but in Kit's steady eyes, for all their quietness, he read a purpose so stern that he quailed before it, and, in a clumsy fashion, he put one knee down to the ground, and then stretched his great body on the grass.

Kit stooped over the wounded Boer, unclasped the belt round his waist, then stepped over to Wilmann. He slipped the strap across his back and underneath his arms, and, with a sudden exertion of strength, drew the elbows tight together, and slipped the pin of the buckle through a hole in the strap, thus rendering his prisoner harmless. He allowed him to lie there, while he quickly, but as effectively as he could, bound up the wounds of the groaning Boer.

'Get up, Wilmann,' he then said. 'We will see to your comrades on the other side of the ridge.'

Wilmann scrambled up sulkily, the grass in his hair and beard.

'Let us look after your other comrades,' repeated Kit, pointing with a gesture up the hill.

Wilmann stared at him with a more complete astonishment than ever. Was it possible that this quiet-spoken Englishman, no older than himself, and so long the object of his derision, had wiped out the Boers on both sides of the ridge?

Yes, it was so! Of the Boers beyond the ridge, one was dead the other two were wounded—one seriously.

Kit, with religious fidelity, broke all their rifles, bound up the men's wounds as best he could, took possession of their ammunition, turned four ponies

loose without saddles and bridles, and sent them galloping off across the veldt. Then, leading two of the ponies, he returned to where he had left Boyd.

Kit found, at this point, he must in some way get help from his prisoner ; yet he dare not trust him. He stepped up to Wilmann, and, without a word, released his arms, flinging the strap away. The Boer scrambled to his feet, stretched his big arms out, and rubbed them with rueful diligence. They were cramped by the tight pressure they had suffered. Then he turned and looked at his captor. He was standing a couple of paces distant, his hand lightly resting on the butt of his revolver.

'Now, Wilmann, you have got some strength in your big limbs,' he said. 'Lift my comrade into the saddle. Do it gently, too,' he added sharply, as Wilmann bent roughly over the groaning Boyd.

Giving him brief directions where to put his arms round Boyd, and how to lift him, the wounded Englishman was raised safely enough into the saddle. But it was impossible for Boyd to sit there without help, and Kit had to reluctantly abandon his plan of riding the other pony himself.

He turned the beast loose, and, with a sharp stroke on its flank, sent it galloping off ; then he turned to Wilmann and bade him a grim 'Good-bye.'

'Wilmann,' he said, 'we have had our fight, and you have been beaten. But it may be your turn next time. We need not bear each other ill-will. You have got your wounded comrades to look after, and I must take care of my mate.'

Wilmann stared at him with eyes still full of uncomprehending wonder. He could understand neither Kit's strange fighting skill, nor his equally strange

magnanimity. Here was a rooinek of a type of which he had never dreamed; and, for the first time Wilmann began to doubt whether, after all, the business of shooting Englishmen was going to be quite as easy and triumphant as he had imagined. Certainly, if all Englishmen were of this quality, it was a question, not of a march to Simon's Town, but, perhaps, of a flight to Pretoria, and even beyond.

Kit, however, had by this time turned his back on his prisoner, and begun the long tramp through mud and rain towards Ladysmith, leading the pony on which Boyd sat.

There was no risk, he calculated, in giving his prisoner freedom. He had neither rifle nor pony, and had three wounded comrades on his hands. There was little fear of his carrying news of the march of the column in time to do any harm.

CHAPTER XXX

FOR A COMRADE

KIT knew that with his wounded comrade he could never overtake the column. To attempt to travel fast, or to travel far, would kill Boyd. But the poor fellow was fanatically certain that the Boers would shoot him if he fell into their hands, and he besought Kit so pitifully, and with such agitated insistence, 'not to leave him,' 'to get him away,' that he found it necessary at least to start on the journey to Ladysmith. He was sure they could not travel far; but the wounded man, as though some fever of fear were burning in his blood, persisted in going on.

The rain beat on them in bitter driving sheets; the road was a mere ribbon of viscid mud, twisting along the bottom of a deep and narrow valley, a valley walled in with naked hills; the gaps in the range were mere funnels, through which the wind came in furious and icy gusts. With bent and swaying figure, and groaning at every step of the plodding horse, Boyd still insisted on pushing forward.

Kit, however, was studying, with keen eyes, the hills, rent with steep valleys, on either side of the track. Finally, without a word, he turned up one which promised shelter, and brought the horse to a standstill at a place where the tree-clad shoulder of a hill ended

in a tangle of splintered rocks. Boyd was almost past speech when Kit lifted him from the saddle. A crevice, sheltered from wind and rain, was found; and here, on a couch of hastily gathered fern, Boyd was laid. Kit piled ferns on the wounded man's feet and body, to keep them warm, put his canteen, filled with water, beside him, with the little stock of bread he had.

'Boyd,' he said, 'your one chance is for me to ride forward, and bring back an ambulance and a doctor. You must keep your spirit up. I'll push on fast and hard, and be back with help long before morning.'

'They'll not let an ambulance party come out,' groaned Boyd. 'The Boers will be swarming on the track of the column by that time. They'll not let you come back.'

'I'll come if I'm alive,' said Kit steadily. 'I'll come alone if I can't bring help.'

Boyd looked at him, with despair in his eyes.

'I'll be dead before you get back,' he whispered. 'Why should you come back? Why risk your life for me?' he asked bitterly. 'I've not been such a good chum to you. It's every man for himself.'

'No, unless I'm dead, I'll be back here before day-break. One Englishman doesn't abandon another in that fashion,' he added, with a smile.

'You're a good fellow, Somers,' said Boyd huskily. 'There must be something in your religion after all.'

'There's everything in it, Boyd,' responded Kit, with energy. 'And look here, old fellow, I'm leaving you, but there's One beside you all the time, and One who knows you, and thinks of you, and loves you, and can help you. My poor fellow, you've tried to live without Him, and you've made a bad mess of it. Talk to Him, Boyd,' he went on earnestly, 'as you lie here alone.'

Listen to Him! Be a little child before Him! Don't you need Him?'

Boyd, with a groan, said 'Yes, he needed God now, if he never did before'; and Kit rode off, feeling that Boyd was in that school of pain where human nature must learn its most needed lessons.

The sound of the trampling hoofs of Kit's horse died away, and Boyd lay in a great desolation. Fever burned in his blood; fear, as with a finger of ice, chilled his spirit: fear of the Boers; fear of the haunting silence and of the coming night; fear of death, and of Something more terrible than night or death—fear of God!

Fear and pain and loneliness, and the chill approach of death itself, are God's servants. They speak when gentler voices are unheeded. At their whisper in Boyd's trembling ears the cells of memory were unsealed—a hint of that awful resurrection, not of buried flesh, but of buried and forgotten deeds, which must come, sooner or later, to every human soul. Boyd caught faintly, at times, the low, deep vibration of guns from some far-off battlefield. In some distant valley, across the hills, men were contending. The sound seemed to flow in through Boyd's senses, and prick his half-swooning imagination with new and strange alarms. It was not the iron lips of actual guns speaking, but some deep voice, out of far-off, unknown chambers of the universe. It would presently swell and deepen, and fill earth and sky and night and space with its tumult; and then break in on his affrighted spirit in overmastering accents!

In those momentary bursts of deep sound, and in the pauses of silence alike, the voices of old memories, of old passions and desires, were swallowed up, and

all Boyd's faculties were resolved into a mood of eager and affrighted listening. Which he feared most, the deep, muttering sound, to which the air thrilled, or these dread intervals of silence, he could not himself tell.

Quickly the night drew on, with its deepening shadows and whispering voices. On the black, outspread canvas of the night-sky, figures seemed to shape themselves in outlines of fire. They came, and went, and came back again. The black, empty space was peopled by them. One moment faces of fire seemed painted on the shadow-filled air; the next, there was nothing but the deep, unilluminated darkness. Boyd's wound was fevering his blood, and playing tricks with his senses; but an aroused and terrified conscience was shaking yet more terribly his spirit. His life seemed painted on that screen of darkness; and all things were now set in a new perspective. Against that background of darkness—darkness born of Eternity and of Judgement—they wore a new aspect. He recalled things base, vile, evil. They stung him with shame; they shook him with dread.

. . . And then on the darkness broke the vision of a Divine Face. He knew it by the crown of thorns; by the deep, tender eyes, challenging, intolerable. Love was in them—love measureless, eternal; love clad in garments of suffering. But that love had in it, as one of its elements, infinite purity. Time and Eternity were its servants.

As he gazed and trembled and wept, Boyd knew himself. The ancient words of Job crept into his memory, '*Now mine eye seeth Thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.*'

Meanwhile Kit rode—or, rather, splashed—on the

track towards Ladysmith. He drove his tired horse on with ruthless energy. More than once he took to the hills to escape parties of Boers.

Once, just as night was closing about him, he heard, far off, a faint sound of a hymn, as though chanted in some upper chamber of the air. His blood chilled, his flesh crept at the sound. It seemed to fall in faint and ghostly cadences upon him, out of the blackness of the night-sky. Kit had not much imagination, and what he had was in a state of excellent discipline, so he quickly grasped the real character of the sound he heard. A Boer commando was encamped in some fold of the unseen veldt near him, and the men were singing their evening hymn. Some eddy of the night wind, some curve in the earth's surface, flung the sound far up into space; it rose high, thin, mournful, wailing from the lonely veldt to the vacant sky, with much more of melancholy than of faith in it.

More than once he heard, from the black hillside above, the deep, triple-booming roar of a lion. Once a storm, such a storm as only African skies know, swept over him. The lightning almost blinded him with its white flame. He heard the thunder crashing in the mountains, the deep voice of the hills calling to the lowlands, the sound of the swollen streams rushing through their imprisoning banks, the clamour of the wind—its hollow note in the valleys, its scuffling shriek on the splintered edges of the cliffs, its mighty trumpet notes on the high peaks.

And still, through darkness and tempest, through rain and wind, Kit pressed on, dogged, tireless, indomitable. He must bring his comrade safe to camp. He had no plan beyond that, or other than that.

The sun had long set when the sprinkled lights

of Ladysmith came into sight, and, splashed from sole to crown with mud, Kit reported himself to his captain, and told his tale.

Captain Forrester listened with grim attention as Kit told his story, and he noted, with a soldier's eye, the signs of battle and travel on his face and figure. He brought out, with brief, curt questions, details which Kit omitted.

'You've done well, Somers,' he said, at last—'well! No one could have done better. I'm proud of you, my lad. If every one did as well the Boers would soon hand in their checks. But the orders are dead against sending out small parties. The Boers must be swarming all over the country you crossed, and how you got through I can't guess. Poor Boyd must take his chance. The Boers will pick him up, and they won't treat their prisoners ill.'

'But Boyd has special reasons—or thinks he has—for fearing them; and, Captain Forrester, I promised him——'

The captain bit his moustache, with a perplexed air. The natural undisciplined man in him was on Kit's side.

'Well, lad; give me the letter you found on the Boer. I'll see the general and give it to him, and report your request, but——' and he went off with a discouraging shake of his head.

'He's a plucky fellow,' said General White, as he listened to Forrester's story; 'and this dispatch he captured is important. But I can't send out an ambulance party so far.'

'He'll go, general,' said Forrester, in tones of conviction, and with an air as though he wished to go himself.

'Well, if he goes and gets back,' said the general, 'he'll deserve to be shot for disobeying orders, and to get the Victoria Cross for doing an amazingly plucky thing.'

The two officers looked at each other with an odd expression on their faces.

'Look here,' said the general, 'you say he's utterly run down. He ought to be relieved from duty for a couple of days. Relieve him, and don't let me know—and take care not to know yourself—what he does with himself for those two days.'

So the night was still young as Kit, mounted on a fresh horse, turned his face again towards Sunday River. The crescent moon hung low in the west; the sky was full of flying clouds, through which the stars shone keenly. The hills rose black and lonely before him. The cheerful sounds of the camp died behind him. There was weariness in every drop of his blood; his limbs shook as with ague. But it never so much as occurred to him that he need not go. He must keep faith!

And he had his plan, which shaped itself in his brain as though automatically, and without any reference to his will. An hour or so after leaving Boyd, he had noticed, in a fold of the hills, a lonely Boer farm. The owner, and every son able to ride a pony or pull a trigger, would, no doubt, be on commando; only women and Kaffirs would be left. Kit had his rifle across his shoulder, and a handful of honest British sovereigns in his pocket. He would buy, or compel, help. A couple of Kaffirs and an improvised stretcher was all he needed to bring Boyd into camp.

As it happened, the task proved to be unexpectedly

easy. Kit found his way to the farm, and, though it was now long past midnight, and half a dozen fierce dogs bayed furiously at him, he rode to the door and beat on it till a point of flickering light and a faint murmur of voices told that the household was roused. The door swung sullenly back, the muzzle of a rifle gleamed in the wind-blown light of a candle.

‘Don’t shoot,’ said Kit coolly, ‘I’m a friend.’

The startled face of a Boer woman came next into sight. She listened with compressed lips and staring eyes as Kit told his story, and explained what he wanted. The lad’s honest face—he was little more than a lad yet—moved her; she was woman and mother all over.

‘My own boy,’ she said, ‘is on commando with his father. God bring him home safely! If he needs it, may some good comrade do for him what you are doing for your friend.’

Three cheerful-faced Kaffirs, whose teeth shone white in their black complexions, were enlisted, a rough rug was fastened with straps of hide to a couple of poles, and the party set off, the Boer woman briefly refusing to take any money.

Day had just began to dawn in the grey east as Kit and his little party turned up the valley where Boyd lay hidden. As they came near the rough slope of rocks a high, monotonous voice broke out. The swift syllables had no sense in them; but the shrill voice, floating up the face of the hill with its note of lunacy, had a weird effect, and Kit’s Kaffirs flung down their rugs and poles, and prepared to bolt. With some trouble Kit persuaded them to wait, while he went forward and explored.

Boyd was delirious, and could not recognize his deliverers. Kit poured cool water into the parched lips, adjusted the bandages, strapped the fevered body and shaking limbs on to the stretcher, and the journey back to the camp began.

The Kaffirs proved invaluable. Their limbs were tireless. They knew the hill paths and the short cuts. Their keen eyes detected any sign of Boer parties. Many a pause had to be made to moisten Boyd's fevered lips, and it was late in the afternoon when the little party reached the British outposts.

Kit's face was drawn and white ; every limb shook as with ague ; his lips were red with fever ; his eyes were sunken in his head.

'Well done, Somers!' said Captain Forrester, with emphasis, 'well done! But, my poor fellow, you must be as bad as Boyd.'

Kit was past speech, and that night the hospital tent had two men, fever-patients, and which was in more deadly peril even the grave-faced doctor could not tell.

CHAPTER XXXI

MR. GIFFORD ON HIS TRIAL

LITTLE Mary's funeral did not take the shape which Mr. Creakles's courageous fancy would have given it. Mr. Gifford declined, abruptly, to allow the bones of his dead child to be ground for the purpose of making rhetorical bread for his committee. A deputation of the Association, indeed, had waited on him, to offer suggestions as to the funeral; but Mrs. Gifford broke in upon the interview, white-faced and dry-eyed—for some fire of anger seemed to have scorched up all the moisture of tears.

'Gentlemen,' she said, while her lips quivered, 'can you not leave us with our dead? We will bury our child——'

Here she stopped; speech failed her, and the pause was more eloquent than speech.

'We will not detain you, gentlemen,' said Mr. Gifford, with somewhat grim courtesy. 'This is a matter in which the Association has no concern'; and the deputation, consisting of Mr. Creakles, Mr. Bagges, and Mr. Leech, shambled out with somewhat undignified haste, and Mr. Bagges, in particular, expended many lurid epithets on things in general when the pavement was safely reached.

The next day a little cluster of mourners stood

round the child's grave. It was a bitter day. The air was grey with vapour, and full of drifting snowflakes. As Mr. Gifford looked into the grave, he saw the cold, white crystals fall softly on the coffin-lid which hid from him the face of his dead child, and cover it with a sheet of glittering particles. Whilst he gazed with tear-wet eyes, Mr. Walton began to recite the words of Scripture. It had been arranged there should be no formal 'service' at the grave; but at Mrs. Gifford's express request, Mr. Walton was to pray. He knew his Bible by whole books, and the syllables flowed from his lips with unfaltering clearness:

'Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep; but we shall all be changed; in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump. For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. . . . So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . .'

In the pauses of Mr. Walton's voice, the silence, to Mr. Gifford's imagination, grew intense. Sky and space and earth seemed to listen. In these pauses—perhaps by some trick of his overstrained senses—the air seemed to thrill to a sound inexpressibly soft, far-off, insistent. It was the elfin-like whisper of the falling snow.

The heavens were dark; the earth was frozen; the grave gaped a parallelogram of mere blackness at their feet. Yet, through the snow-filled air, and over the new-dug grave, that great message rang as though pealed from some divine trumpet. Mr. Gifford felt,

in some stir of emotion too deep for speech to utter, or for reason to analyse, how trivial were all the rhetorical performances of his lectures before the triumphant message of those great words. They rang out of the far-off spaces of eternity. They spoke to the depths of the human heart.

It was not a 'funeral service,' so much had been conceded to the Association; but Mrs. Gifford had passionately insisted that her child should not be buried 'like a dog,' with no word of blessing spoken over her grave. So Mr. Walton stood there, his venerable grey head uncovered to the falling snow, and prayed with a simplicity of tenderness, and a loftiness of faith, that melted the bereaved father, in spite of himself, into speechless tears. His sceptical philosophy, for the moment at least, seemed to dissolve in its breath, like an icicle when summer airs blow. Death, set in the perspective of Mr. Walton's prayer, seemed but a momentary accident; its dreadful sundering was but for a passing breath; the resurrection was a near and triumphant certainty. Christ would undo all the mischiefs, and restore all the thefts of death. And then death itself should die!

Perhaps it was all an idle sentiment; but from what unrealized forces, and out of what strange chamber of the universe, did such a faith creep into the human heart?

Amongst the members of the F.A., great was the scandal of this 'superstitious' service over his child's grave to which Mr. Gifford had lent himself. Their President, they agreed, with angry emphasis, had 'given away' the whole cause of his own creed. He had allowed the faith he was paid to teach to stand dumb and rejected by his child's grave, while a 'parson,' a

representative of the despised churches, had prayed. John Blunt, too, had taken part in that ignoble surrender to superstition.

‘Yes,’ said John grimly, when remonstrated with in official tones by Mr. Creakles, ‘yes, I was there, and would stand there again. But don’t be afraid, Creakles, you are safe. Nobody will waste a blessing on your bones, or expend a syllable of prayer on your coffin-lid.’

‘This is personal,’ Mr. Creakles replied, with much dignity, ‘and it is irrelevant. The Association must assert itself. It has been betrayed, and betrayed by its own paid advocate’; and Mr. Creakles emphasized ‘paid’ as though it added a tenfold blackness to Mr. Gifford’s guilt.

The scandal was undeniable. In the extremity of his own grief, the apostle and representative of Freethought had called in the aid of Christianity! This was, for the new creed, nothing less than an official and public proclamation of mere bankruptcy by its own chief orator.

Mr. Walton, when questioned by Mr. Looker, showed none of the triumph of a victorious disputant.

‘Poor fellow,’ he said. ‘Let him alone! He is in God’s school. He has his lesson to learn; and Death and Sorrow are stern teachers. Don’t meddle with God’s plans,’ he added, with a touch of sternness which for a moment abashed even Mr. Looker.

The members of the Freethought Committee, however, naturally rejected this view. It was a gross case of public disloyalty, and, with one accord, they put on their war-paint to avenge it. An angry revolt against their own lecturer broke out. They would renounce him! They would stop his salary! They would cast

him off publicly. Angry heads were put together ; and when their plans were complete a formal meeting of the committee was called.

The members sat on either side of a long table. At one end sat Mr. Gifford himself. He was silent ; an unusual pallor lay on his face. No man offered him any greeting. At the other end of the table sat Mr. Bagges, the chairman, with Mr. Creakles beside him, as secretary. On either side of the table was a row of frowning faces. Mr. Gifford's act had stung their pride. It threatened their finance ; and, worst of all, it disquieted their confidence. Their new creed was, for them, a sort of moral opiate. It drowsed conscience. It shut out of the intellectual horizon the disquieting shape of God, the haunting vision of Eternity.

Now, Mr. Gifford's act suggested an unpleasant doubt as to the validity of their creed ; and the members of the committee resented that doubt, as an opium-eater might resent any attempt to rob him of his drug. John Blunt was present, and stirred restlessly from time to time in his chair, as he gazed with perplexed eyes at the silent face of his leader.

'Gentlemen,' said Mr. Bagges, the chairman, going straight to his point, 'Mr. Gifford has played it rather low down on us, and on the Cause. We sympathize with him, of course, in his trouble ; but we have a right to expect him to act up to his principles. Especially,' he added, with a snort of indignation, 'since he is paid hard money, and plenty of it, to defend them. Why, there is not a Freethought lecturer in the land who has a salary equal to that we are paying Mr. Gifford. We don't believe in prayer. The Association's against prayer. Mr. Gifford knows that prayer is all nonsense. Why, the best lecture he ever gave

was that on "The Modern Praying-wheel." Yet he allowed the Wesleyan parson to give a double-turn of his prayer-wheel over his child's grave! The Association,' Mr. Bagges went on, lapsing for a moment into pathos, 'has a right to expect better things of their President. He has made us ridiculous. He ought to act by Freethought as well as preach it. What do we pay him his salary for?'

Here Mr. Bagges stopped, almost choked with moral indignation, while angry 'Hear, hears' ran round the table.

'What has Mr. Gifford to say?' demanded Mr. Bagges.

'I have nothing to say, gentlemen,' said Mr. Gifford, 'except that this matter lies outside your functions.'

'It's no business of ours, eh?' demanded one short, stout, apoplectic-looking member of the committee, Mr. Grimes, the publican. 'But your salary is our business, as you will pretty quickly find out.'

'If we admit prayer,' argued Mr. Tinkler, a local shoemaker, whose forte was severe logic, 'we admit everything. You admit a personal God and a personal Providence.'

At a prospect so appalling the entire committee shuddered.

'You might as well,' continued Mr. Tinkler, 'swallow the whole Bible. What will become of Freethought in that case?' he demanded, unanswerably, while the lines of frowning brows on both sides of the table wagged tragically.

'Every parson in the place is laughing at us,' cried another member of the committee, striking the table with an emphatic fist.

Mr. Creakles argued that their collections were certain

to be injured by Mr. Gifford's inconsiderate action. He had destroyed the moral influence of the Association. But Mr. Gifford was young, said Mr. Creakles, with a patriarchal look ; and he was naturally knocked off his legs for the moment by the death of his child. They must allow for a little incident of that sort, and not to be too hard on their lecturer. Let him make some public explanation and apology next Sunday night, and declare that his faith in the glorious doctrines he was paid to teach were unshaken. He had himself, Mr. Creakles explained, prepared 'a little thing,' in the way of an epitaph, on strictly secular lines for Mr. Gifford's child ; if Mr. Gifford would allow that, as a permanent statement of his theological views, to be inscribed on the grave-stone, the Association might deal with him liberally, and even pay for the cost of the epitaph, and so everybody would be gratified.

'And would you turn the dead child's grave into an advertisement for Creakles's bad Latin?' asked John Blunt, in a disgusted voice. 'We profess to believe in freedom of thought ; why can't we leave Mr. Gifford free to do what he liked by his little girl's grave? Do you allow to other people only the freedom to agree with yourselves, and not freedom to differ from you?'

'Confound "freedom"! ' said Mr. Bagges, the chairman, with energy, 'if it means that Mr. Gifford is free to take our money and use it to destroy our cause.'

To treat freedom thus was a strong step. It was like speaking disparagingly of the equator! But there was undeniable force in Mr. Bagges's logic.

'We preach toleration,' pursued John Blunt, 'and we have got to practise it. And we must tolerate not only the things we like, but the things we don't like.'

John would fain have hinted that Mrs. Gifford, and not her husband, was responsible for the part Mr. Walton had taken in the child's funeral, and there was no arguing with a broken-hearted mother. But there was a look on Mr. Gifford's face which warned him that this was perilous ground.

'Gentlemen,' said Mr. Gifford, at length, 'I acknowledge that I owe to the Association and to the public some statement of my position. I will give it on Sunday night, in the Hall, at our usual meeting. You shall then hear all I have to say.'

'But what will you say?' asked Mr. Creakles, with a note of alarm in his voice.

'You will know then,' said Mr. Gifford, rising, 'and I can say nothing more now'; and, taking his hat, he left the room.

The members of the committee looked at each other in some perplexity.

'We should have stuck to Stumps,' exclaimed Mr. Bagges. 'He would never have risked his salary by giving us away in this fashion. Mr. Gifford has never got rid of the parson in his blood.'

On reaching his home, Mr. Gifford found a new worry awaiting him, in the shape of a visitor. It was Cecil's mother, an anxious, unhappy woman. Alarm for her son made her forget all social usages and ecclesiastical prejudices. Mr. Gifford had 'got hold' of Cecil; and she had come, all unknown to her sacerdotally minded husband, to see if her woman's fingers could not rescue her son from that gentleman's deadly grasp. She did not understand that Cecil had gone far beyond Mr. Gifford; and, in fact, regarded that gentleman with some contempt, as a case of arrested intellectual and moral development.

'This is an unexpected pleasure, Mrs. Sparks,' said Mr. Gifford, holding that lady's card in his fingers.

Tact may be some women's gift, but tactless women abound, and Mrs. Sparks was a very bad example of the type. She had no more 'diplomacy' than an average cow, and she blundered straight on to her grievance. But her mother's love and her mother's grief clothed her, somehow, with unaccustomed dignity.

'Mr. Gifford,' she said, 'what have you done with my son?'

'Done with your son?' repeated Mr. Gifford, with raised eyebrows. 'Nothing, Mrs. Sparks. He comes to hear me lecture; but he is bright-witted and strong-willed, and I don't know any one less likely to be influenced by another.'

'But, Mr. Gifford,' Mrs. Sparks went on tearfully, 'he is a changed lad. I have lost my son,' she cried, with a thrill in her voice, 'my Cecil. He is quite changed. Your teaching has killed his love for his mother and for his home. His very face is changed, and he is going wrong—I know he is going wrong. Mr. Gifford, give me back my boy,' and Mrs. Sparks wept unashamedly.

Mr. Gifford felt it rather hard. Cecil, he knew, had his own creed and his own law of conduct, which not seldom startled Mr. Gifford himself. To be asked to 'give' this resolute and advanced young gentleman 'back to his mother,' like some stolen baby, was more than a little ridiculous.

'I have not taken your son, Mrs. Sparks. He has chosen his own path. He thinks his own thoughts. You cannot keep a boy in short clothes for ever.'

'Oh, would to God I could!' cried poor Mrs. Sparks. 'I was a happy mother when my boy held my hand

and walked by my side. But,' she went on with raised voice, 'since he attended your lectures he has given up everything I taught him to believe. He laughs at prayer. He has left his home. Mr. Gifford, your Freethought will destroy homes, and break mothers' hearts.'

'God forbid !' said Mr. Gifford energetically ; 'that is,' he added hurriedly, conscious of a lapse into an outgrown theological formula, 'I hope it is not so.'

'Yes, it is,' insisted Mrs. Sparks, with an energy Mr. Gifford found uncomfortably impressive. 'What had I to live for but Cecil ? And now he never comes near me ; and it is you, Mr. Gifford, and your teaching. Take care ! God will reckon with you. You will be stabbed yourself, just as you have stabbed others.'

Mr. Gifford looked at Mrs. Sparks ; she was not young, nor comely, nor dignified. Her hair was disordered, her hands gloveless, her face moist. And yet her speech had the courage and fire of some ancient prophetess, and Mr. Gifford thought, involuntarily, of Balaam's ass betaking itself miraculously to speech. The next moment he despised himself for the injurious comparison. Here was a mother fighting, as she believed, for her son, and there was both pathos and reality in her words.

'What have you taught him ?' Mrs. Sparks went on to demand. 'The teaching that takes a son from his home, that kills a mother's hopes, and wrings her heart with terror, must be evil. Suppose some one took your child from you ?'

'God has done that,' whispered Mr. Gifford humbly, and with a quiver in his lips.

'Oh, yes,' said Mrs. Sparks hurriedly, and with a sudden and half ludicrous drop in her voice, 'I had

forgotten. Poor Mrs. Gifford! You will think me foolish,' she continued, half apologetically, 'but my Cecil—my Cecil!'

'I don't think you need be anxious, Mrs. Sparks. I hope he has learnt nothing from me that will do him harm. At any rate, he is not one to be influenced too much by others. He has his own ideals. He knows what he wants, and he will get it.'

'Ah, but, Mr. Gifford, you robbed him of his Christian faith.'

Mr. Gifford was tempted to ask whether Cecil ever had any 'Christian faith' worth stealing; or whether casting away his father's curious conception of religion represented any serious loss. But he was a gentleman. His own grief made him humble-minded; and, though he found Mrs. Sparks very trying, yet he would not retort on her.

Moreover, he felt there was something in her complaint. He was uneasily conscious of a moral deterioration in Cecil; he had seen in him a more ravenous selfishness, a loss of restraint, a surrender to appetite, a recklessness full of evil omen. Was it really his teaching which wrought that malign transformation? Mr. Gifford would have scorned the self-accusation once; but he was, at that moment, conscious of a new and curious doubt.

'Mrs. Sparks,' he said, 'if I have any influence over Cecil, and can make him value his own home more, I will use that influence. A creed which makes a son love his mother less must be bad. If my teaching has that effect, I am ashamed of it.'

'That is just what it does,' broke out Mrs. Sparks persistently, and with new tears.

As soon as Mrs. Sparks had been, with much patient

tact, got out of the house, Mrs. Gifford came into the room where her husband, weary and dispirited, was sitting. Her face was deathly white; her eyes dark with grief that tears could not utter; her whole countenance was scribbled over with strange characters of suffering. She listened as her husband told the story of the scene in the committee.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘they acted after their kind. Frank, that our little Mary has been taken from us is grief enough; but it is not that which breaks my heart and fills my sleep with dreams which are a terror. Oh, Frank! what cruel lips were mine to be silent when Mary asked me in her dying hour to pray for her!’

And in the anguish of her grief Mrs. Gifford cast herself into the arms of her husband, who could only stroke her hair with a dumb and helpless pity.

CHAPTER XXXII

MR. GIFFORD'S LAST LECTURE

IT was Sunday night, and the theatre where Mr. Gifford was accustomed to lecture was crowded as it had never been before. It was his first appearance after his child's death. The 'scandal' of the funeral had set all tongues wagging. Mr. Gifford's committee was known to be in open quarrel with him, and something sensational was expected.

Would he justify the manner of his child's funeral, or would he explain it away? The published title of his lecture, 'Freethought and Broken Hearts,' pricked public curiosity, but gave no clue to what Mr. Gifford's deliverance would be. His committee, indeed, read the title of the lecture with suspicious eyes.

'There are no broken hearts,' said Mr. Creakles, with conviction.

'Anybody who is fool enough to have a heart, or to let it get broken,' added Mr. Bagges, with more naked brutality, 'is a weak creature, who ought to be put in an asylum.'

'The world is for men; and Freethought is a creed for men,' argued the little asthmatic tailor who occupied a seat on the committee of the Association.

'The title of Mr. Gifford's lecture is fit only for women.'

A deputation from the committee sought, in vain, an interview with Mr. Gifford, for the purpose of ascertaining what the lecture was to be about.

'We'll make short work of him,' said Mr. Bagges, with wrathful emphasis, as, with the other members of the deputation, he came down the steps which led to Mr. Gifford's house. The more aggressive members of the committee proposed to shut the theatre against a speaker, and a subject, so doubtful; but this, it was finally decided, would only advertise the scandal more widely, and precipitate an open quarrel.

As Mr. Gifford stood up before his audience that long-remembered Sunday night, he was an impressive figure. The knightly set of his head was as striking as ever; but the black flowing beard made the white face almost ghastly. There were new lines on it, lines written by pain and mental conflict. It was a face at once weary and sad, and its deep-set eyes had a new melancholy in them.

As the audience looked up at the speaker, a thrill of expectation and excitement ran through it. No commonplace 'lecture' could come from such a face. His hearers felt, somehow, that they were spectators looking on a tragedy.

'Broken hearts,' began Mr. Gifford, in his deep voice; 'the world is full of them. They are its puzzle and its tragedy. "Never morning wore to evening but some heart did break." This "river of deep Time,"' he continued, quoting Shelley, 'is made brackish with the salt of tears.'

Then he went on to paint the many forms grief takes: defeated love, wrecked hopes, broken ties;

the child taken from its mother's arms, the bride made suddenly a widow; the tender lives that are born, and bloom for a moment, and fill a home with their perfume, and then perish at a breath. He painted these diverse forms of human sorrow, while deep thrills ran every now and again through his voice, shaking it, and the hearts of those who listened, till women were sobbing aloud, and unaccustomed tears were running down the faces of bearded men.

The arithmetical mind of Mr. Creakles was busy assessing the money value of these tears, and he whispered confidentially to John Blunt:

'We shall have the biggest collection of the whole series to-night.'

John's only reply was to glare at him with a ferocity which was almost murderous.

'Now,' proceeded the speaker, 'any adequate human creed must give some account of grief; must find a place and use for it; must bring to it some balm of comfort. A creed that cannot shed light on a child's grave, nor dry a woman's tear; that has no whisper of hope for love bereaved, and no glad prophecy for life arrested, is not the creed that the world requires. Grief is so large a factor in life that any theory of life and conduct which claims human respect must solve its sad riddle. What has Freethought to say about broken hearts?'

Here came a long dramatic pause. The audience stilled into a silence which was almost death-like. Even Mr. Creakles had, for the moment, forgotten the collection, and sat, with eyes almost starting out of his head. What was coming next?

'My friends,' Mr. Gifford went on, almost in a whisper—but a whisper that ran, a clear thrilling pencil

of sound, through the great building. 'Freethought has nothing to say! It is paralysed at the touch of grief. It is dumb at the graveside. It has no eyes to see into that darkness! I have stood there and I know it. It cannot put a smile on the face of a dying child; it has no logic that can bid a mother's tears cease to flow.

'Why did I not tell you this before? Because I did not know it. When I saw my child go through the dreadful darkness of death and I could speak no syllable of poorest comfort to her, or to myself, then I learned that, in one hour of human life, at least, and at one point of human experience, my creed is bankrupt.

'Why do I tell you this now? Because I hope I am an honest man, and I must deal honestly by you. I am risking my whole career by the words I am now speaking. I am pulling down the house my own hands have built. After to-night I shall be the jest of multitudes. I have destroyed my own position as a public teacher.

'But these things do not count. I have told you, from this platform, night after night, where Freethought is strong; I now tell you where it is weak. A creed which leaves me without a whisper of counsel, of explanation, or of hope when my child dies, is not good enough for me, nor for any other human being. It is not adequate, as a theory of life and conduct, for it does not cover all the facts.

'The Gospels represent Jesus Christ saying, "He hath sent Me to bind up the broken in heart." The evidence as to the historic Christ does not convince me. At that point I stand to-night on unchanged ground. But if a Christ did come, that is exactly what

He ought to say. For "broken hearts" need some touch of divine magic to heal them! They leave the world the scandal and the jest, as well as the tragedy, of the universe, if there is no message of comfort for them, no compassionate and divine Figure—call Him "Christ" or what you will—to put His gentle and transfiguring hand on them.

'But do I bid you believe in the historic Christ? Have I discovered another creed and a better than that I have hitherto taught from this platform?'

Then came another long and thrilling pause. Presently, in low, deep tones, the speaker went on: 'No! I will be perfectly frank. Mr. Walton prayed by my dying child; and out of his prayer came something which put light into her dying eyes, and comfort into her mother's broken heart. I bless him for that. He did what I, the father and husband and teacher, could not do. Was it a divine reality; a force reaching out of some unseen world; a breath coming from divine lips? Or was it only a human delusion?'

Here came another long and nerve-shaking interval of silence. The speaker seemed to have forgotten his audience. He was holding bitter debate with himself.

'I do not know,' he whispered. 'I do not know! Would that I were sure! I grope in the dark. But, ladies and gentlemen,' he continued, his voice taking depth and volume, 'if it were a delusion, then,' dropping his tone to a whisper again, 'it is better than any reality I know.'

At this stage Mr. Bagges tried to interpose, and, by his authority as chairman of the Association, to stop

a deliverance which had, for that Association itself, the office of mere dynamite. But it was in vain. The audience had a momentary vision of a stout man, with a red face and wildly gesticulating hands, thrusting himself betwixt the speaker and themselves. But he vanished abruptly, cowed by the sudden and universal shout of wrath which swept over him.

Mr. Gifford went on, as though not conscious of any interruption :

‘I shall lecture no more here, nor anywhere else. I go out to begin the world again. I am a child that has been set a new lesson—hard and bitter! The ground under my feet fails me. I go out to seek what I have not yet found, a key to the puzzle of the world. But my last word here shall be honest.’

And with an abrupt gesture of farewell he was gone from the stage, and his hearers were left, staring with open-mouthed wonder at each other.

Mr. Creakles was the first to recover himself. He seized a collection plate, and advanced on the nearest row of the audience with outstretched hand. But nobody heeded him, and he found he lacked the moral courage to carry the plate round. Mr. Bagges, meanwhile, clambered to the stage, and tried to announce that Mr. Stumps would lecture there the following Sunday evening, and make mincemeat of Mr. Gifford ; but his voice was unheeded.

The audience was breaking up, with a curious slowness and silence, with ears in which still rang the cadences of Mr. Gifford’s closing words.

‘Man,’ said David Christie to John Blunt as they emerged from the crush at the door into the moonlit and quiet street, ‘yon was grand!’

'Yes,' said John defensively, 'of course you think so.'

'And what do you think?' demanded David, with emphasis. 'Can you mend what Mr. Gifford said?'

'No,' replied John reluctantly; 'Freethought does not work at every point,' and he thought ruefully of his own experiences as a Freethought missionary.

'Why, it doesn't work at any point! It made Tom Oxley a worse drunkard than he was before. You didn't cure Angel Court with it, did you, John? You couldn't build a Sunday school on it,' he went on cruelly. 'And when death came into Mr. Gifford's own family he found his creed was a fraud. Isn't all that true, John?'

'Yes,' confessed John, who was stubbornly honest; 'Yes. But does any creed cover all the facts of life? Don't they all break down at some point? Isn't the perfect creed yet, after so many centuries, to be evolved?'

'No,' replied David, with emphasis. 'Religion suits me everywhere. It sets me singing when the sun shines, and it helps me to go on singing when there's no sun. Life is better for it, and so is death. It just suits me, and it will suit everybody else. As for your Mr. Gifford, he did to-night a noble and honest thing. He's in God's school rightly enough. And if he keeps the temper he showed to-night he'll come out all right. John! do you come with him!'

'I don't change lightly,' said John Blunt, after a long pause, and with a curious thickness in his voice.

'But you're an honest man, John, and you must follow the light, no matter where it shines. Man! would you rather keep company with old Bagges and

that creature Creakles than come with the saints of all the ages to the feet of Jesus Christ?’

‘I’d come, David, gladly enough ; but I must first be convinced truth lies that way,’ and, without a word of farewell, he turned his back on David, and hurried away.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CHRIST AND THE BROKEN-HEARTED

MR. GIFFORD'S renunciation of the creed he had preached so eloquently and so long naturally created a profound sensation in Middleford. A star of the first magnitude in the somewhat murky sky of unbelief had been suddenly quenched! But the event served, in an odd way, as a test of character to all kinds of persons and institutions. To some it was a human tragedy; to others a human deliverance; to yet others it was a dialectical victory, to be celebrated with loud beating of party drums.

Mr. Brush promptly began, in *Zion's Banner*, a series of articles on 'The Breakdown of Freethought.' The series, however, did not enlarge to any appreciable extent the somewhat limited circulation of that journal. Mr. Sawders announced a line of discourses on 'Infidelity and the Logic of Facts.' The process of writing these discourses soothed his own self-respect greatly; but their delivery, while it satisfied his deacons, did not attract the crowds upon which Mr. Sawders fondly calculated. The public of Middleford, as a whole, declined to look at the matter as an incident in a controversy, a mere argumentative victory or defeat. It was the human interest that stirred its imagination; the vision it offered of how a human soul bore itself in the wreck of its faith.

Only one minister in the town succeeded in catching the public ear on the whole topic. Mr. Campbell announced that he would preach the following Sunday night on the subject of 'Christ and Broken Hearts'; and all Middleford crowded to hear him. For Mr. Campbell himself was universally trusted and loved. He was no controversialist, and nobody believed that he would attempt to extract a mere dialectical triumph from the incident. He was sure to treat it generously and nobly, and the crowd filled every inch of space in his church.

In one corner of the great edifice sat a woman's figure, clad in deepest black, the unlifted veil hiding her features. It was Mrs. Gifford! Hers was, in very deed, a 'broken heart.' Her sorrow crushed her. The grief, the wonder, the heartache; the waking each morning with a sense of loss, the lying down each night with fear of dreams—all this overwhelmed her. The very perspective of the world was changed. Dumb, indifferent things—a book, a ribbon, a child's lesson-book, the refrain of a song, a little worn glove, a vacant chair—all these suddenly stabbed her as with the thrust of a sword. She stretched out hands, empty of her child, in a darkness where no star shone.

Her husband's face was eloquent with wordless sympathy, but he could not help her. His creed had no key to unlock the mystery of a perished life. When Mrs. Gifford saw that Mr. Campbell had undertaken to expound the message of Christianity to a broken heart, she resolved to hear him. If there were a Christ whose hand could heal, with a divine touch, the wound in her heart, she would welcome Him. So she stole in, with veiled face, and sat, a quivering figure, weeping unseen tears through the whole discourse.

Mr. Campbell was not a dazzling and picturesque figure in the pulpit. A grave, quaint, homely face, framed in snow-white hair, with fatherly eyes; eyes in which troubled women found a benediction, and from which tempted men drew strength. His voice had in it no heart-shattering depths, no clarion notes. But its pure and gentle cadences ran in music through the air, and in every accent there was audible a crystalline sincerity which clad even simple words with the charm of eloquence.

Mr. Campbell read his text in quiet tones: 'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.' The mere words stole like a gently whispered benediction over the great audience.

'There *are* tears,' said the preacher. 'They are part of human history. They will last as long as human history.' He found his poet, characteristically enough, not in the austere grace of Tennyson, or the lyrical exaggeration of Shelley, but in the quieter melody of Longfellow:

There is no flock, however watched and tended,
But some dead lamb is there;
There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,
But has some vacant chair.

The air is full of farewells to the dying,
And mournings for the dead;
The voice of Rachel for her children crying
Will not be comforted.

'But,' said the preacher, 'tears are not the final fact of human life. Here is written, and by the hand of pitying and Eternal Love, the consummation of human history. "God shall wipe all tears from their eyes." That is the ideal towards which God is working!

That shall be the final victory of His grace. A day will yet dawn which shall see no tear fall.'

Tears have their reason, their office, their message; and the preacher undertook to give the Christian interpretation of sorrow. He took as a typical human grief the death of a child.

'It is idle to deny,' he said, 'the puzzle, the tragedy, the grief of such an event. It seems to represent the irony of some mocking Power, the very bankruptcy of human love.'

Mr. Campbell, like Mark Antony, was 'no orator'; but he had the orator's instinct, which made him shun generalities and talk in concrete phrases. He put into speech the amazed anguish of a mother who looks on her dead child.

'To what strange and unguessed realms is our child gone, gone without gesture of farewell, and gone at a breath! What a silence lies on brow and lip! The alabaster box is broken; the precious ointment is poured out. A child's life is the preface of a volume, the bud of a flower, the prelude to a song. But here the book, with so fair a preface, is unwritten; the bud is withered; the song is unsung. Why did God permit such a love to take root in our hearts; such a tie to weave itself, by a thousand clinging memories, round our lives; and then, at a breath, and without a whisper of explanation, destroy it? A love which yesterday was the door by which the purest happiness stole into our lives becomes to-day a dark gate of silence on whose threshold Sorrow sits and weeps. Is it the act of love thus to cheat love, and turn it into anguish?'

Tears were running down the faces of many in the great audience by this time, and Mrs. Gifford felt

as though some quiet, gentle voice was translating into speech the problems of her own wordless grief.

'Then,' continued the preacher, 'there are so many questions the death of a child drives us to ask, and for which there seems no answer. Was our child frightened when she stepped into that strange realm, so utterly beyond our vision, into which she has gone? What faces did she see first? What lips spake to her? Who took her by the hand? Did she forget, in one swift instant, those she had left behind her on earth? We held our child a moment ago in our arms; now she is beyond Aldebaran and the Pleiades! We cannot speak to her, nor touch her. We call her name. Does she hear and know? Love aches to tell her things, to ask her a thousand hurrying questions, to know what she has seen and what has befallen her. But love on this side has no voice, and on that no answer. Our child in the happy home life had no secrets: not a thought that was not transparent; not a pain nor a gladness which was not shared. But in a moment she is shrouded in a mystery so profound that the imagination stands dumb before it! Why have we this passion of longing to do something for our child, and are yet mocked by a helplessness so complete?

'Then there is the question, which stabs like a sword, and which is part of the mystery of death: Need our child have died? If love had only been wiser, more vigilant, more keenly alert to danger, might she not still be with us? Why was this great office of motherhood and fatherhood given only to be wrecked? When, through the shadow and swoon of death the landscapes of heaven broke upon our child,

and her wondering eyes saw the shining faces of the angels, did she miss us? The primary, passionate instinct of a mother's heart, of a father's heart—to protect a child, to explain all that is strange, to hush every anxiety—stands at the gate of death mocked and baffled. The little figure goes into those strange realms alone! What has Christianity to say to a puzzle so dark? Can even the hand of God so touch our eyes that, under the sting of such a sorrow, they shall cease to weep?’

Here Mr. Campbell stopped, while the silence in the church deepened until it seemed as if a thousand people held their breath. Mrs. Gifford, in her far corner, dreaded lest the deep sighs which in spite of herself crept through her lips would turn all eyes upon her.

‘Yes,’ began the preacher again, ‘religion has a message for grief; Christ interprets His own divine mission. “He has sent me,” He says, “to bind up the broken in heart.”’

Then he proceeded to expound the Christian view of a child's death. ‘Is it true that it is a realm of darkness into which our child has gone; that no ray of light shines upon it; that no whisper of revelation has been spoken about it? That is to declare the Bible a blank book, to assert that Christ has not come, or has not spoken, or that we cannot trust His word. All is told about our dead in Christ which, at this stage of our education, we need to know. We do not need a plan of heaven, and a catalogue of its furniture, a volume to describe its natural history, a picture in detail of the saints in their robes. The one great word of Christ is enough: *I go to prepare a place for you.* If this office had been given to human love, if every mother could go before her child into that world, with a warrant

to "prepare" a special heaven for her little one, would that not be sufficient? But human love might blunder. The task is too great for clumsy human hands. So Christ takes it upon Himself. It is one of the great offices of His redemption. "I go," He says—"I, who have bought the soul of your child with My blood—I go to prepare a place for your child." And though the secret of that heaven is still undeclared, yet can sorrow itself ask more than this: that Christ has prepared it?

'We may interpret God's love for our child by our own love; though this is to interpret the sea by the drop, the furnace of the sun by a spark. He Himself taught us the love that burns in our blood. He kindled this instinct of sheltering tenderness in us towards our child. Has He not Himself got what He has given us? Or is the drop more than the sea, deeper, wider, and swept by mightier tides? Has the spark a brighter flame than the sun?

'But will God give us back our child; or is the separation of death an eternal divorce? We can bear the momentary grief if beyond it there shines the hope that love will yet clasp its object again. Now, to doubt that is to arraign God's love itself. It is the worst sort of atheism. Would any mother give her child so much as a doll, and then, in idle caprice, snatch away the gift, and mock her child's heart? And will our Father deal so with His children? Is He less good than we are? If we, being evil, give at love's bidding, and give finally, will not God? He gave us the child. He inspired the love which wove round His gift the purest and most enduring affections of which we are capable. Will He, in cruelty or in caprice, pluck back His gift? Will He suffer death to defeat it?'

Then the preacher's voice rang out like a trumpet: '*The gifts and calling of God are without repentance.* They are not caprices. They make visible, for a moment, and under one set of conditions, a divine purpose which is not a vagrant impulse, but an eternal act. What God wills once, He wills for ever. What He gives once He gives for ever. "Thy brother shall live again," Christ said to Martha. "*Thy* brother," not some one else's. "Thy child, O woman, shall live again," God whispers. Thy child; not so altered as to be no longer thy child.

'Do you doubt at that point? Do you want some proof that your child still lives? I will not quote texts. The very intensity of the love God kindled in you for your child, the range and sweep of the affections that gather round it, justify the expectation of immortality. Does God make the divinest thing in us a jest? Does He kindle affections that beat with the pulses of eternity, and then leave them cheated so soon, and so cruelly, by a too swift death? "Thy child shall live again." A child's grave is one of the strongest arguments for immortality. We might accuse God's love of cruelty, or God's wisdom of folly, as we stand beside it, if there shone upon it no sure light of immortal hope.

'But the belief of all this, you say, is hard; and imagination is even more difficult than faith. To believe, in spite of darkness and mystery, that our child is with God; that this is far better than being with us; that her feet, which once made such music in the home, now run on the golden pavements of God's city; this is hard! But harder still to realize it. We cannot realize it! The imagination is frozen. Oh, if we could but feel all this!

'This only means that we cannot translate into the terms of the emotions, and of the imagination, the things that belong to the realm of faith; or that we do so imperfectly, and with many a failure. But this is not a moral process, and has no moral significance. It is a luxury, not necessary to faith; it is perhaps even injurious to faith. "Blessed," said Christ, "are they that have not seen and yet have believed." "Blessed," He might say, "are they that cannot 'feel,' or 'realize,' or 'imagine,' the things that belong to the spiritual realm, and yet believe." To hold by trust things unrealized, this is faith!

'Grief has its gains,' the preacher went on. 'It is part of our education. Nor is "the far-off interest of tears" so far off as Tennyson seems to think. Tears clear the spiritual vision. We get, in the breath and awe of the death-bed—if only for a moment—a true perspective. We gain a new sensibility. Beyond death, Christ teaches us, there is the resurrection. Death and the resurrection are twin and answering facts; and the resurrection shall undo all the mischiefs of death, shall restore all its thefts. The gate of heaven is the great meeting-place for all the souls death has parted on earth. In the Father's house above shall the whole family gather, and no child be missing.

'But in the order of time, in the order of God's grace, in the order of human history, "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." The last! You may not have on this side of the resurrection a bliss God is keeping for you on the other side. We must walk by faith. We must wait God's time. We must trust God's love. And the hour comes swiftly, comes surely, comes soon when the great promise of this text shall be fulfilled, and "God shall wipe away all tears" from human eyes.

O weeping mother, trust that love! Wait for that hour!’

Then the preacher broke into prayer, while every head in the congregation instinctively bowed.

‘O Thou who art the Lord of life and death; who sittest calm in Thy eternity, and dost determine with Thy counsels the coming and going of us, who are creatures of Time: we are Thy children, dear to Thee. Our affections are Thy gifts. All human love but faintly interprets to us Thy love. Thou dost not willingly afflict us. And when the heart fails, and the spirit breaks, Thou knowest! Thou carest! Thy succours are near! We will trust Thee, and wait Thy time. We do not ask to know Thy secrets. Thou art leading us, and if it is in the darkness, it is yet well. Thou wilt bring us to the light, and soon. Until the day dawn, and the shadows flee away, help us to cling to Thee!’

.

Mr. Gifford was sitting in his study that night, when his wife, with a quick step, entered. Her eyes were shining. Her face was wasted and white, but the lines seemed gone from it. Her lips wore a smile, a smile so sweet and strange, such as her husband had never seen there before.

‘Frank,’ she cried, as she ran to him, and put her arms round his neck, ‘we have not lost Mary, and I have found Christ!’

Mr. Gifford looked at her in amazement. Had grief overturned her reason?

‘No, Frank,’ she said, as though reading his thought; ‘I am sane. Perhaps for the first time in my life I am sane.’

Then she told how she had listened to Mr. Campbell ; how her puzzled grief found its interpretation in Christ ; how the shadows had lifted from Mary's grave.

'We have not lost Mary,' she repeated, again and again. 'God gave her to us. He has taken her from us for a moment, but He is keeping her for us. He will give her back, for He is Love. My tears,' she said—they were running hot down her cheeks as she spoke, but she smiled as she wiped them away—'my tears have a new meaning, and God shall soon wipe away all tears.'

'Soon?' asked Mr. Gifford, with a sad smile.

'Yes, "soon,"' she cried. 'What is a life-time but a moment in God's arithmetic?'

'Oh, Frank,' she went on, 'did I do wrong to go?'

'Wrong? No! Anything—truth or lie—which will save your heart from breaking, is welcome. I would not destroy your new faith. I envy it, though I cannot share it.'

'But, Frank, you will,' cried his wife, 'you will!'

CHAPTER XXXIV

EXIT MR. CREAKLES!

MR. CREAKLES sat in his office with lowering brows and hungrily meditative eyes. He felt that his familiar world was tumbling about his ears in ruin. The People's Building Society was, somehow, contemplated by the good people of Middleford themselves in a highly unsympathetic and critical spirit, which was fatal to cash deposits. The speculation with the bank's money, which his league with Cecil made possible, had proved a disastrous failure. Cecil was a squeezed orange. So was the bank. So was Mr. Gifford; so was the Freethought Association itself.

Mr. Creakles began to suspect, indeed, that his own turn to be squeezed was coming near; and at the thought he wriggled in his chair uncomfortably. What could he do to escape that unpleasant process, or who was there to whom he could transfer it? Over this interesting problem Mr. Creakles meditated long and deeply. At last he got up, consulted his letter-book, grinned an evil smile, and, sitting down at his desk, wrote with great care and repeated revisions a few lines on a sheet of paper that bore the official imprint of the F.A. Then, putting on his hat, he took his way to the bank.

Cecil cast a disquieted look at him as he entered the banking-chamber, but Mr. Creakles, with a smileless nod, passed on to the manager's room, knocked, and entered, carefully shutting the door behind him.

Something in the careful thoroughness with which Mr. Creakles shut the door fluttered Cecil's nerves. It suggested anxious secrecy, and behind that must be a plot; and Mr. Creakles's plots, as Cecil had good reason to know, supplied ample reasons for anxiety to other people.

'What is that rogue Creakles up to now?' muttered Cecil.

Mr. Arden's face, thin and haggard, wore a look as disquieted as that of Cecil himself when he saw the foxy eyes of Mr. Creakles peering at him, with an expression half meditative and half impudent; a look which made Mr. Arden feel very much like an imperfectly squeezed orange about to be put in the squeezer for another turn. And Mr. Arden was a sadly nerve-shaken man. The mysterious burglary, with the complication brought about by Kit's unexpected appearance on the scene, had sorely tried him. The injury to Kit's character, too, pricked his conscience with a sharpness which surprised even its owner. Then there was the ever-gnawing consciousness that Kit knew his evil secret!

Kate saw, with eyes of tender pity and alarm, that her father was a broken man. He sought more diligently than ever the perilous consolation of his drugs, and they failed to soothe him. Some deep disquiet was at work in Mr. Arden, which not all the nepenthe of which poets ever sung could lull.

'Well, Mr. Creakles,' said Mr. Arden, pulling himself

together, and putting on an official manner, 'what can I do for you?'

Mr. Creakles, who was still contemplating him with a pair of foxy eyes, whose expression flustered Mr. Arden's nerves sadly, made no reply, and Mr. Arden repeated his question irritably. Still Mr. Creakles continued to gnaw his lips, and to regard Mr. Arden in exasperating silence.

'Confound it, Creakles,' broke out the manager, grasping the arms of his chair, 'what do you want?'

Mr. Creakles smiled an evil, contented smile. He had shaken Mr. Arden, so to speak, out of his official wrappages.

'There's £3,000 to the credit of the Association, beside the securities, isn't there?' he asked.

Mr. Arden drew a small ledger across the table, and examined a page.

'Yes, and I don't think the Association itself knows how its account has shrunk.'

Mr. Arden wanted to give Mr. Creakles a little of the discomfort he felt himself. But the little man was quite unmoved.

'Well,' he went on coolly, 'I will draw out the balance, and take over the securities.'

'What!' cried Mr. Arden, sitting up.

'Yes. Here's an order in due form.'

'But your name is not good enough by itself, Creakles. That order is only waste paper.'

'Yet you will take it,' persisted Mr. Creakles, steadily.

'No, I won't,' said Mr. Arden, with much agitation. 'It would ruin me.'

'It will mean ruin to you if you don't,' continued Mr. Creakles, with serene composure. 'Look here,

Arden, turn up the letter signed by the president and the treasurer of the F.A., authorizing you to make payments for the missionary branch of our work.'

'Yes, but the orders for such payments were to be signed by three persons—Mr. Gifford, Mr. Blunt, and yourself—and they have always, as a matter of fact, been signed by the three.'

'Turn up the letter,' insisted Mr. Creakles.

Mr. Arden took his letter-file from the safe, and turned up the letter. Mr. Creakles, without any apology, stepped to the desk and looked over his shoulder.

'You see,' he exclaimed, with a note of triumph in his voice, 'the orders are to be signed by Mr. Gifford and Mr. Blunt, "or" by myself. Now, here's my order. It will cover you. You must take a little risk,' he went on, to the unfortunate manager, who held his order with shaking fingers. 'There's a bigger risk if you don't,' he added, grimly. 'The whole business we have been carrying on must come out, and that means the jail-cell for all of us. When I have cleared out you can put what you like on me, and that letter will cover you.'

Mr. Arden still stared with alarmed eyes and frozen lips at the order, while the little man went on smoothly, explaining again and again what he wanted, and why and how, and what advantages would follow to everybody from his plan, till Mr. Arden, with his opium-drugged brain, was semi-mesmerized.

'I can't do it,' he groaned at last.

'You can, and you must,' persisted Mr. Creakles. 'Look! Here's my order. There is the letter from the F.A. You can stand on them. You will be happier when I am off, and safer. What do the funds of the Association matter to you? If I don't go,

everything comes out, and then, instead of broadcloth, you will wear a suit with the broad-arrow all over it.'

'But the Association never meant to give you that power,' remonstrated Mr. Arden, almost in tears.

'How do you know?' asked Mr. Creakles; 'and what does it matter to you? There's the letter.'

'But I oughtn't to act on it without reference to the Association.'

'Well, refer it to them a week hence; but, for a clear week you mustn't let any one—any one,' he repeated, with emphasis—'not even your slippery accountant—know about the business. I want the securities; an order at sight on the Bank of England for the cash, and a clear week.'

It was a battle of wits and of wills, and the keener wit, the more resolute will, naturally prevailed. 'There's some risk if you do it,' argued Mr. Creakles, with monotonous iteration; 'but it's risk for to-morrow, or for next month. There's ruin if you don't do it; and it's ruin to-day.' And Mr. Arden, with his drug-shaken nerves, belonged to the class of weak men to whom an inconvenience to-day will always out-bulk irretrievable disaster next week.

As Mr. Creakles came through the outer office Cecil looked keenly at him, and that gentleman's hand went up, with a sort of protective jerk, to his breast-pocket, which held a somewhat bulky parcel. Cecil noted the act, and wondered what it meant. He stepped into the manager's room, and found Mr. Arden in the act of pouring, with shaking fingers, a few drops of a colourless fluid into a glass half filled with water.

'What did old Creakles want?' asked Cecil.

Mr. Arden drained the glass, and then, in what may be called managerial tones, he replied:

'Nothing, Mr. Sparks, nothing ; or, at least, nothing about which I need consult you' ; and Cecil went back to his desk with a muttered oath upon his lips.

That night Mr. Creakles went by train to London, and his solitary clerk explained to callers that he would not be back for two or three days.

Exactly a week afterwards, Mr. Bagges, the chairman of the F.A., received a letter from Mr. Arden, stating that a small cheque had come in, drawn upon the account of the Association, and had been paid ; but the account was now overdrawn. Would Mr. Bagges call and arrange matters? If the F.A. wanted an overdraft the manager would be glad to know the amount and the security.

'An overdraft?' gasped Mr. Bagges, in wrathful astonishment. 'Why, we have got thousands to our credit.'

He hurried in upon Mr. Arden, red-faced with mingled haste and anger, and, taking no notice of the manager's somewhat nervous smile and outstretched hand, broke out :

'What does this mean, Mr. Arden?' flinging that gentleman's letter down before him. 'An overdraft! Why, you've got all our securities, and there must be some thousands to our credit.'

'There was,' replied Mr. Arden, 'a week ago ; but Mr. Creakles drew it all out.'

'Mr. Creakles,' said Mr. Bagges, while his red features suddenly grew redder than ever, and his big gooseberry eyes almost started out of his head. 'That wretched little rogue ! Why, he had no authority.'

'Oh, yes, he had,' said Mr. Arden, turning up a letter ; 'he had an authority signed by yourself. See,' and he showed Mr. Bagges the historic letter instructing

the Bank to make payments on the order of Mr. Gifford and Mr. Blunt, 'or' Mr. Creakles.

The characters seemed to dance on the paper before Mr. Bagges's agitated vision. It was all Greek to him. He was slow-witted at best, and just now he was in a state of semi-idiotic bewilderment. He grasped the situation at last, however. Through the crevice of that little 'or' the whole capital of the F.A. had vanished.

'The rogue!' he gasped; 'the rogue!'

Then language failed him, and, with protruding eyes and twitching features he stood trembling on the verge of mere apoplexy. He recovered himself at last.

'But, Arden,' he shouted, 'you must be a rogue, too. You couldn't have believed that we had given one man, and that man Creakles, power to handle all our cash! No manager in his senses could believe that.'

'I don't know what you meant, Mr. Bagges,' said Mr. Arden, with much dignity. 'But here is what you wrote. And Mr. Creakles is the secretary of the F.A.'

'Why didn't you consult us?' demanded Mr. Bagges, with a fresh access of bewildered and helpless wrath.

'I was busy, and I thought it unnecessary. But surely it's all right. Mr. Creakles——'

'Oh, bother Mr. Creakles!' interrupted Mr. Bagges. 'He has got the plunder right enough.'

No doubt about Mr. Creakles's character or intentions, for a single moment, visited Mr. Bagges's brain!

He sank down into a chair, and swore at both Mr. Creakles and Mr. Arden, at such length, and with such energy and picturesqueness, that Cecil, attracted by the sound, looked in at the door.

'You are rogues all,' bawled Mr. Bagges. 'It's a conspiracy. We'll run you all into jail for this'; and he rushed out in a state of apoplectic fury,

Here was some new alarm! Cecil looked with questioning eyes at Mr. Arden. That unhappy man sat, with white face and trembling limbs, in his chair.

'What's up now?' demanded Cecil.

'Mr. Creakles,' began Mr. Arden, in what was intended to be a dignified and official manner—'Mr. Creakles has apparently somewhat exceeded his powers, and has drawn out all the cash and securities of the F.A.'

'Creakles!' almost shouted Cecil.

Then he stepped swiftly to the safe, and threw the door open. The securities were gone.

'The scoundrel has left us in the lurch,' he cried, 'and has carried off the booty. This explains the draft for £3,000 that came in for collection this morning. It is gone into Creakles's pocket, and we are left to stand the racket.'

Mr. Arden tried to put to him the view that it was 'better for everybody' that Mr. Creakles had gone; that the loss would fall on the Association, and he was covered by Creakles's order.

'No,' said Cecil, 'you are a ruined man. No manager in his senses would have parted with the cash and the securities on such an order. This will drag everything into the open. We have got the risk, and Creakles has got the cash and is off.'

Cecil looked at Mr. Arden with furious contempt. He understood perfectly his weakness and cowardice. This was no ally to be trusted.

Then a tempest of anger against Creakles swept over him.

'That skunk!' he broke out, 'to have carried off all the booty . . .!'

With silent fury he turned his back upon Mr. Arden, seized his hat, and hurried out of the bank. All his troubles had come suddenly to a climax. The solid ground was crumbling under his feet. He had covered up all traces of wrong-doing in the bank's books with infinite skill; yet he dreaded an investigation, sharpened by suspicion. That, he knew, would be fatal. The jail-door seemed to gape wide open before his imagination.

Cecil suddenly resolved he would 'clear out,' or, at least, he would make preparations for clearing out. He was young. He knew himself to be smart. He would seek, under other skies, a career which had become impossible in England. Why should he stay to live in an atmosphere of fear?

The meeting of the Committee of the F.A., hurriedly called by Mr. Bagges, was naturally of a very stormy character. The president, Mr. Gifford, had broken with them, and with the abandonment of his lectures, all the public influence of the Association had vanished. The secretary, Mr. Creakles, had gone off with the cash. The members of the committee were left without a leader, without funds, the mere jest and laughing-stock of the community.

What added infinitely to their discomposure was a letter from Mr. Creakles himself, which Mr. Bagges had received. It ran as follows:

'The Committee of the F.A.

'GENTLEMEN,—I have taken a step which narrow and prejudiced minds will certainly not understand, and may, perhaps, describe in harsh terms. But I am sure the members of the Committee will at once recognize that my action is a beautiful illustration of

those great principles which the Association exists to disseminate.

‘I have taken with me all the cash standing at the credit of the Association, and all negotiable securities, as per list enclosed. I have done this under the authority given me by a resolution of the Committee, which will be found on page 320 of the Minutes. My action, therefore, is technically legal; but it is also, I feel, quite in accordance with the principles of the Association. The legacy of the late Mr. Hobbs was given for the purpose of “making practical applications of Freethought principles.” Now, the money was being wasted in the frivolous missionary attempts of Mr. John Blunt. Mr. Gifford was a mere sentimentalist, and it is now known to the Committee that he is disloyal to our principles. I feel that I represent those principles more satisfactorily than either of these gentlemen, or than any other member of the Committee, or than all of them put together. I therefore have a superior moral right to the funds, as I can employ them more in accordance with our principles than the Committee can.

‘I contend, therefore, that, as an example of “Freethought principles applied to practical affairs,” my action in taking charge of the funds comes within the terms of the trust, as well as within the letter of the instructions contained in the resolution on page 320 of the Minutes.

‘To avoid unpleasantness I have not sought a personal interview with the Committee before leaving Middleford. As I am a man of peace, constitutionally averse to strife, I do not give my present address, lest any hasty and narrow-minded steps should be taken which would injure our Cause by creating a

scandal. I may explain, however, that I am seeking a clime more favourable to liberal views of life and work than that of England.

‘I hope the Committee will, in time, derive consolation from the knowledge that the funds are in the experienced hands of one who may be trusted not to betray Freethought, after the deplorable example of Mr. Gifford, and not to waste its cash in ridiculous schemes of so-called “philanthropy,” like Mr. John Blunt.

‘Philanthropy, I feel strongly, should begin at home. The “social problem” in which I am most interested is myself, and to this problem I propose to devote, on the highest principles of Freethought, the remainder of Mr. Hobbs’s legacy.

‘I have the honour to be,

‘Gentlemen,

‘Your obedient servant,

‘SAMUEL CREAKLES.’

The debate which followed the reading of this letter was of a very animated character. Mr. Bagges’s contribution to it consisted chiefly of a series of apoplectic oaths. They were fired off at intervals, like signal guns at sea, without any relation to what was being said at the moment; they were of great picturesqueness and energy, and they certainly rendered Mr. Bagges himself one useful service. They saved him from a fit! The rest of the Committee all talked together, each man at the top of his voice, and each in a distinct and separate variety of rage; Mr. Bagges’s oaths meanwhile, as we have said, sounding through the tumult of angry voices like so many minute-guns. Mr. Grimes, of the White House, at last, by superior energy of lungs

and range of expletives, obtained a hearing. 'Let's take out a warrant for the scoundrel,' he shouted.

'But the money's gone,' wailed Mr. Tuggs, the hairdresser, 'and who's going to put his hands into his pocket for the sake of prosecuting Creakles?'

'I won't give sixpence to save the whole Association,' cried Mr. Bagges. 'If Creakles hadn't got the money some other rogue amongst us would. I'm done with the whole racket'; and the little man, looking more explosively apoplectic than ever, got up to leave the room.

'Mr. Bagges needn't insult the whole Committee,' said Mr. Tinkler, the radical shoemaker, with much dignity. 'And he's one of the trustees of the Association; he's responsible for its funds. It might pay us better,' he went on venomously, 'to serve a writ on him and the other trustees for the money that's lost.'

'What,' bellowed Mr. Bagges, with a new eruption of expletives, 'make me pay for the money Creakles has stolen!' and the little man seemed on the point of committing a personal assault on the whole Committee.

'Gentlemen,' remonstrated John Blunt, who had hitherto sat silent, 'we're bankrupt in cash, but we needn't be bankrupt in manners or in common sense. We've got the reputation of the Association to protect. We mustn't wash our dirty linen in public.'

Mr. Bagges breathed his final benediction on the Association in the shape of one loud and comprehensive oath.

'Perhaps Mr. Blunt,' the little shoemaker suggested agreeably, 'knows where Mr. Creakles is, and has come to some arrangement with him.'

John Blunt contemplated the whole company with stern eyes.

‘We’re acting like children,’ he said. ‘Are we going to destroy the whole cause? Perhaps,’ he added, with a disquieted look, as he gazed at the faces before him, ‘perhaps the cause deserves to be destroyed.’

‘Well, John,’ said Mr. Looker, as they met next morning, ‘you needn’t be much distressed. Every cause has its unworthy disciples. You have your failures, like more orthodox bodies. But you may at least claim that you have produced one thorough-going and consistent representative of your principles.’

‘Yes,’ answered John Blunt, doubtfully. ‘Whom do you mean?’

‘Mr. Creakles, of course,’ replied Mr. Looker promptly. And John Blunt, who was, mentally, not very agile, had walked half down the street before he could make up his mind as to what exactly Mr. Looker meant, and whether it was a compliment to Freethought, or a slander on it!

CHAPTER XXXV

THE CONFESSION

UNDER the shock of so many incidents, the prick of so many alarms, Mr. Arden's health was breaking down. Without his drugs he felt it impossible to live, and to show an untterrified face to the world. Yet he loathed them. They destroyed his will-power. They were the root of sin; they bred in him a weakness, a moral enervation which made any baseness possible. His body was a mere web of shaken nerves; and within sat a terrified conscience that no drug could reach and soothe! He was fear-haunted. Dreams crept into his sleep such as De Quincey has painted in his *Opium Eater*; but, in Mr. Arden's case, conscience drew the dreadful imagery of these dream-chambers! Conscience spoke in the voices that whispered to him, and pursued him through all the realms of sleep!

Then came Mr. Creakles's swoop on the funds of the Association. Mr. Arden found himself the unrewarded accomplice in a new fraud. Out of the alarms bred of this, conscience took a new austerity; and Mr. Arden was shaken with new conflicts. He was trembling in a perpetual anguish of indecision, now wildly tempted to suicide, and now

humbly meditating confession, when a malignant fever seized him.

Kate had long watched with deep disquiet the dull and sunken eyes, the shaking limbs, of her father ; and now, when fever broke out, she hung over him with tireless and gentle ministry. He seemed to be at times visibly dying under her eyes ; and by a curious and subtle bent in her feelings, she was not unwilling that her fears for her father should fan her anger against Kit. For, in spite of herself, that anger was dying away, and in its stead an unconfessed and unanalysed sense was growing up that she had wronged him ; and the thought almost broke her heart. And yet if he were the cause of her father's illness, surely her anger against Kit was justified !

Cecil, though from quite other motives, was almost as much alarmed at Mr. Arden's illness as Kate herself.

'The fool,' he reflected bitterly, 'will certainly blab. He's losing his nerve. He will give the whole thing away.'

He came as often as he could into the room in which Mr. Arden lay, wasted with fever ; he toiled with infinite art to keep up the courage of his accomplice ; to hold him at least to an unwhispering silence. He felt that, somehow, Mr. Arden was being touched with new and incalculable moral forces. What effect these forces might produce it disquieted him sorely to guess, and Cecil quietly made arrangements to disappear on the first signal of danger. And signs of peril were already emerging. A special examination of the books of the bank had been made, but Cecil had covered up all traces of wrong-doing with such

ingenuity that apparently nothing particular was discovered. But—an ominous sign—the board notified Mr. Arden that he must be present at its next meeting, prepared to answer questions, and to give any explanations of certain facts—including Mr. Creakles's disappearance with the funds of the Freethought Association—in his power.

'Oh, father,' cried Kate, as she saw his unconcealed agitation, 'it's all that dreadful burglary. You have had no rest since then. And it is that foolish and obstinate tale of Kit's. How could he bring all this on you?'

Mr. Arden winced.

'Don't blame him, Kate, he only did what was right, or what he thought was right.'

But this was a magnanimity which only served in Kate's eyes to make the part Kit had played still darker. Her father was ruined in health, and might be dismissed from the bank; and all through him!

But when the Board of Directors met, Mr. Arden was past answering questions. He was in a raging fever, a fever that ran its malign course with deadly speed. His system had no resisting power. All his nerves were drug-corroded. Kate saw with infinite grief her father's unhappy life burning itself out to ashes in a flame of mere fear and disquiet before her eyes. In his lucid intervals she read the Bible to him, sang to him with divine softness and tenderness one hymn after another, talked to him of the Divine Saviour of men, of the love—beyond all human imagination or guess—of God. Mr. Arden would make no response, but he listened. The hymns, especially, crept, with their soothing music, into the cells of his restless brain,

and he would ask for them again and again. But, plainly, some strange burden lay on his mind and sealed his lips. It was killing him.

Kate brought Mr. Walton to see him, and he was shocked at the change he found. There was some unspoken question in the hollow and sunken eyes, fastened, with such pathos, on Mr. Walton's face. The sick man listened to all he could say; but it was as though he had said nothing. Some curious pre-occupation sealed all the avenues to his mind.

At last, with a feeble gesture, and a look that almost broke Kate's heart to see, her father waved her out of the room.

'Mr. Walton,' he said, 'you are an honest man. Tell me: is there any saving mercy for a man who has no mercy on another?'

'No,' was the reply, given with characteristic honesty and directness; 'if you refuse to forgive another you make forgiveness impossible to yourself.'

'Ah! it's not a matter of my "forgiving" another,' Mr. Arden replied, with an odd, pathetic smile. 'Ought I to let another bear the shame of a wrong I have done myself?'

'No. In this world or any other, you will find no peace with God, and you can have no peace with yourself, if you have injured another, and persist in the injury.'

But Mr. Arden fell silent. He was restless, haunted with the sense that he ought to confess and make reparation. God's face was stern against him, he felt; it must be stern—it ought to be stern—till he did confess. To confess was the only way of reparation. Yet to do that was to betray Cecil. He might have

borne that; but it would rob him, in addition, he believed, of his daughter's love, and break his daughter's heart. Then Mr. Arden thought of the brave young fellow who had spared him. He was bearing shame that he might spare him, and had made that silent appeal that seemed so little and meant so much.

A human soul cannot long endure such discords as these. The most dreadful quarrel the human spirit can know is that betwixt the moral sense and the will. The strife betwixt two such forces ends in one of two ways. Eternal peace comes by the surrender of the will to conscience; or else a brief and dreadful respite is won by the defeat of conscience. For it is a terrifying fact that the moral sense can, for a time, be killed—or, if not killed, be silenced—by persistent resistance.

But Mr. Arden found the happier issue. He had lain one evening long silent; the fever seemed to have burnt itself out, but it left the sick man strangely weak, too weak to even wish to live. Kate sat beside him, stroking his wasted hand with soft fingers. The gathering dusk which filled the room spread what the dying man felt to be a kindly veil on his face.

'Kate,' he suddenly whispered, and there was a note in his voice that sent through Kate's blood a strange thrill—why, she knew not.

'Kate,' he whispered again.

'Yes, father?'

'I must tell you. I can find no peace, but——'

Here speech failed him, and Kate somehow knew, by one swift flash of instinct, that she was on the verge of some heart-breaking discovery.





'I AM A THIEF.'

'Kate, we lost the bank's money. There was no robbery. I lied in the Court. It was not in the safe. Young Somers was right.'

Kate listened, frozen with grief and astonishment.

'We never meant,' he went on with quivering voice, 'to risk the bank's funds, but Creakles got us into his power and——' here his voice broke again. 'I was responsible,' he continued bitterly. 'I was trusted. But I was weak. I drifted. I gambled, in the hope of gaining back the money that was lost; and oh, Kate, I gave away the character of a life-time, and your father is a thief.'

Kate was still listening, with parted lips and panting breath. All this was surely a mere wave of delirium, running through her father's brain. But no! There was a note in the sick man's voice which carried with it a cruel and resistless conviction; and Kate's fears about her father—fears unconfessed even to herself—which had long disquieted her, gave a sudden and dreadful attestation to his confession.

Kate held her father's hand with tightening grasp, while the dying man went on.

'Yes, Kate; it made life hateful to me, and it makes death dreadful.'

At that word, 'death,' a passion of sobs would have burst from Kate, but she fought with heroic courage against them. She lifted her father's hand to her lips and kissed it passionately.

'Oh, father,' she cried, with inexpressible tenderness.

'I won't trick myself or you with soft words,' said Mr. Arden. 'I am a thief.' Then, with a touch of childlike helplessness, he whispered, 'Kate, what shall I do?'

'Oh, father,' she cried, 'God forgives! He waits to forgive! He delights to forgive!'

'Yes, but I must confess. I must not cover it up with a lie. I must not let another remain under suspicion when I am the thief.'

'Yes, father,' she answered steadily, 'yes.' The woman and the saint were waking in her, and speaking from her lips. 'But that way lies peace,' she went on. 'Pardon is there, and hope. Anything else is impossible. And, father, we will bear it together. We will help each other. We will cling to each other all the more.'

'I can't help you, Kate,' replied Mr. Arden sadly. 'I shall leave you with no other legacy than one of shame, the shame of a dishonest father. You will hate me.'

'No, no,' said Kate patiently. 'Oh that mother were here!' she cried, with broken voice.

'Ah!' ejaculated Mr. Arden, with a deep sob. 'Ruth! Ruth!' he went on, calling with broken voice on the faithful wife lying silent in her grave.

Kate steadied herself. She must not give way to the weak selfishness of grief. She must help her father; and with eager voice and trembling lips, while the unseen tears ran in streams down her face, she talked to her father, as to a child, of Christ, who carried the burden of every human sin; of God's mercy, flowing through Christ to all men; of that purity which knows sin, and judges it, and yet does not scorn the sinner; of the joy in heaven over a repenting soul. 'Father,' she cried, 'mother is with the angels, and she knows. She is rejoicing.'

Now, the divine can only be known to us through the human. In the passion and tenderness of his child's

love the dying man began to feel there was the hint, the broken revelation, of a Love yet more wonderful; a love reaching to him out of heaven and out of eternity.

‘Kate, you must send for Mr. Cairns, the inspector. I will tell him everything. If I live I will pay every penny back to the bank.’

‘And if you die, father,’ whispered Kate, ‘I will pay it, every penny of it.’

‘Then my sin will have robbed you, for it will take every penny I have got.’

‘And could I keep it, father, and leave your name with a stain upon it?’

Mr. Arden had now broken down the barrier of shame which kept his lips silent, and it was a relief to tell Kate everything. He talked with feverish and incessant haste, going over every detail of the story again and again; till at last, even to Kate’s feminine intelligence, untrained in business, the whole landscape of the story stood as in clear daylight before her. She comprehended with keenest grief her father’s weakness, that left him to drift helplessly, like a straw caught in some strong tide. She realized, with a sorrow almost as deep, Cecil’s unscrupulous greed; she shuddered at the part of a subtle and tempting devil played by Mr. Creakles, who held, at last, in his mean hands, like so much plastic clay, both her father and Cecil. She saw, too, how Kit had stumbled into the plans of the group, and spoiled them, to his own sore injury.

Mr. Arden at last lay silent, exhausted by mere agitation. After a long pause he began afresh.

‘Kate,’ he said, in a broken whisper, ‘if I don’t live to tell the board all this, you must tell it for me. I couldn’t sleep in my grave with that lie resting on it.’

Tell the board, Kate ; or tell Mr. Benson, the chairman. Tell him everything.'

Kate could not reply in words. Speech had died on her lips. But she pressed her father's hand, and the silent pressure was a promise to the dying man.

'And Kit,' Mr. Arden continued, after another pause. 'He knew.'

'When?' asked Kate, strangely startled.

'After I had given my evidence.' He went on to tell how he had given young Somers the fatal paper. 'And Kate, the envelope he sent me by you held the paper. He gave it back without a word. He knew I would understand, and that it would put a stop to the whole business.'

Even in the tumult of her grief Kate felt a new pang. She remembered how she had misread Kit, and had sent him away in anger at the very moment when he was sacrificing himself for her father. She guessed, with a swift and sure instinct, what he meant by giving back the document, and giving it through her hand ; and she realized the silent generosity with which Kit had endured to be misjudged, even by her. Her heart was almost broken by the tumult of feelings, half bitter and half sweet, as she thought of all this.

Presently Mr. Arden fell into a feverish and unquiet sleep. Kate watched by his bed till the sleep grew deep and dreamless. Then she left the nurse in charge, and hurried to her room, and cast herself, with one swift movement, on her knees by the bedside. The burden laid on her girl's heart was too heavy. She cast it, and herself, at the feet of Infinite Love, and wept and sobbed in a passion of grief. What black threads were being woven into the white web of her life !

Presently a strange peace crept into her heart. She was a little child, holding God's hand. A divine, all-comprehending Love was above this strange tangle of wrong and grief. The words of a familiar and ancient promise seemed to sing themselves over softly in the cells of her brain : '*When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee. When thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour.*'

Then one great verse seemed to call another out of the cells of her memory :

'O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted . . . The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed ; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy upon thee.'

If her father had fallen he had repented ; he had confessed. Again and again Kate thanked God for that.

Just as day began to break Kate went down to the sick-room. The nurse sat drowsily in her chair. Her patient, she whispered, apologetically, had been so quiet, she had almost slept herself.

The patient was, indeed, strangely quiet. Kate bent over the bed. A ray of light crept in betwixt the blinds ; it fell, a beam of gold, across the white pillow, and lit up Mr. Arden's features. He was dead, and death had wrought a strange transformation on his features. The scribbled lines of pain and trouble were effaced ; the dark hieroglyphics of fear had vanished. Calm was on the white brow, a smile on the sealed lips.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WAGON HILL

KIT rallied quickly from the prostration which followed the strain of Boyd's rescue. His youth, his clear blood, his serene temper, all helped him.

'Young fellow,' said the doctor to him at the end of a week, 'you are going to escape enteric, and it is your pluck that saves you. If you had a faint heart you would have fever, sure enough.'

For his part, Kit felt humbly enough that if he had a quiet mind, it was part of the divine gains of his religion. He was in God's hands, and that faith gave him an unshakable serenity. Boyd was tossing on his bed, with parched lips and burning cheeks, and restless eyes, the flame of fever scorching his blood, when Kit, looking pale and wasted indeed, but with cool skin and steady eyes and pleasant smile, found his way to his bedside. Boyd looked at him, half in wonder and half in envy.

'You beat me, Kit, you beat me at every point.'

'But I hadn't your wound, Boyd. That makes all the difference.'

No! not all the difference; you have got some secret that I haven't; something that keeps you cool when other men get flustered, and cheerful when other

men lose heart. Hanged if I don't think it is your religion !' he went on, with a curious smile.

'Yes,' replied Kit simply, 'that puts the whole universe on your side. Nothing can harm you when you are right with God.'

He would not 'preach' to Boyd ; but he noted with what keen and changed interest Boyd now listened to him. He visibly longed to learn Kit's 'secret.'

Kit was soon dismissed from the hospital, and took his place in his troop again.

'You will be recommended for the V.C.,' said his captain to him ; 'for no more plucky thing was ever done than your bringing in Boyd. You may not get the Cross, of course ; but a plebiscite of the troop would certainly give it to you.'

Kit found, indeed, that he had quite a new standing amongst his comrades. He had shown himself a fine shot, a gallant fighter, and a comrade who could be trusted to the death ; and these soldierly virtues were linked to a quiet simplicity of speech and look that half amused and wholly delighted his comrades. This 'boy soldier' had shown himself one of the best men in the company.

Ladysmith was now closely besieged. From its ring of encircling hills the great guns of the Boers barked angrily ; and poured—or rather dribbled, with a sort of leisurely doggedness—an intermittent rain of shells on the little town. The days grew into weeks, the weeks into months. Hunger wasted the strength of the defenders ; fever slew more in their ranks than the bullets and shells of the Boers. To the south Buller was trying to break in to their rescue. Sometimes, to the ears of the besieged town, there stole in over the southern hills faint pulses of heavy sound.

It was the guns of Colenso, of Spion Kop, or of Vaalkranz. At night, on the black canvas of the southern heavens, crimson characters would often come and go. It was Buller spelling out, with his search-lights, some message to the beleaguered town.

The siege practically began at the end of October ; it was on February 27 that Dundonald's gallant horsemen rode into the town. The siege, that is, lasted a hundred and eighteen days. During that long period the bombardment, though it often loitered, never really ceased, and some sixteen thousand shells were flung on the tin roofs of the town, or on the sangars and trenches of the defending lines. The gross number of admissions to the hospital during the siege nearly equalled the total number of the garrison itself ! Every tenth man died, killed in fight or slain more cruelly by disease. More than two thousand cases of enteric and dysentery were in hospital at one time, and this when the garrison was living on a scanty diet of horse-flesh, and was almost wholly bankrupt of medical comforts.

And yet the courage of the garrison never failed. They hit back their besiegers blow for blow. In one night-sortie after another they destroyed the most formidable guns in the Boer trenches. And the seventeen hours' fight on Caesar's Camp and at Wagon Hill, whether for the grim daring of the onfall, or the cool and inextinguishable valour of the defence, is worthy to stand beside the fight on the great breach of Badajos. In the mere quality of endurance, indeed, the story of scarcely any assault on a besieged city known to history can be compared with it. The fight on the long crest from Caesar's Hill to Wagon Hill, it must be remembered, lasted seventeen hours ; Ladysmith, in a word,

during that long stretch of one hundred and eighteen days, was a school of hardship, of endurance, and of valour, such as war has not often seen.

It so happened that for the first two months Kit had no share in the fighting. He was employed as an orderly. His quickness, resource, and cheerfulness made him a favourite with officers and men alike, while he was the good angel of many a little group of pale-faced women, and of little children from whose faces hunger and hardship had blotted out all youthful grace.

But Kit's hour of trial came. On the night of January 5, he was one of the force holding Wagon Hill, at the western extremity of the long, horseshoe-shaped ridge which formed the southern defence of Ladysmith. The party consisted of three squadrons of the Imperial Light Horse, some sappers, and some details from other irregular troops. They were covering a working party of Highlanders, busy placing a gun in position.

Kit was one of the fringe of sentries thrown forward a little below the reverse crest, looking towards the Boer lines.

The night was of an inky blackness ; the face of the hill went down with the abruptness of a vast wall into the deep gloom of the valley. Here and there huge boulders projected from its contour. The valley below was rough with broken rocks, and bristly with Kaffir-thorn. Looking through the darkness straight before him, Kit could see a faint and broken line of twinkling lights. They marked the positions held by the Boers.

At midnight there came floating across the valley faintly, and as though out of immeasurable distance, the sound of ghostly music. They were singing a

midnight hymn in the Boer camps, and the high swelling note, the dying fall, of the hymn, floated through the darkness to the ridge where the British scouts kept watch, with a very weird effect. The black depth beneath, the star-sprinkled height above, the midnight quiet, broken only by that whisper of lamenting music, curiously affected Kit. It bred a strange solemnity of feeling. The darkness seemed to stir and murmur with some coming message, a message of warning and peril. Perhaps his spiritual senses, thrilling to some finer atmosphere, caught a forecast of the bloody tempest of battle soon to rage about him.

As a matter of fact, that far-off, elf-like music was really a battle-hymn. The best fighting commandoes of the Boers were about to fling themselves on the long ridge which stretched from Wagon Hill on the west to Caesar's Camp on the east; and the stormers were preparing themselves, by chanting that hymn, for a very daring exploit.

Two hours of silence followed. In the cold and darkness along the three miles of the threatened hill, the British outposts nodded drowsily. Suddenly Kit heard, at some distance to his right, the challenge of a sentry. It rang, keen, stern, and high-pitched, along the hill front, 'Who goes there?'

From the dim valley-depths there floated up, in clear English tones, the reply, 'A friend!' The next moment the gloom was pierced with a hundred points of sudden flame, and the Mauser bullets were scourging the crest of the hill. The Boer stormers—many of them bare-footed in spite of the Kaffir-thorns—had stolen across the valley, had crept up the steep face of the hill, and opened fire on its crest. A dozen points of fire, scattered along a front of nearly half

a mile, answered the Boer volley, a feeble response to the long, serrated flame with which the Boer rifles had torn, so to speak, the black vesture of the night. It was the British sentries firing. Almost at the same moment, from the very base of the hill, a long line of rifle-fire burst forth. It was the Boer supports covering the stormers.

The stormers themselves, a broken front of rough-bearded men, never paused in their rush. On they came, now stooping to find cover while they fired, now running forward, with crouching figures; and before that long front of black stooping figures, and darting points of flame, coming swiftly on, the British outposts fell back, as though brushed away by some gigantic besom of spitting fire. As he fell back, firing rapidly at the oncoming line, Kit heard, far to the left, the sound of fierce rifle volleys. Caesar's Camp, nearly three miles to the east, was being attacked, at the same moment as Wagon Hill.

The British outposts, however—or such of them as survived—only fell back on their supports. The Imperial Light Horsemen, an irregular line of recumbent figures, lay in the rocks and the long grass just below the crest on the northern, or Ladysmith, side of the hill. The Highlanders and the Sappers, led by their officers, came running up to the firing line, and flung themselves down; and when, through the darkness, the broken, ragged edge of the Boer line coming eagerly on showed itself, from end to end of the British front ran a chain of swift and deadly rifle-flashes. The Lee-Metfords were pouring in a stream of bullets, before which the Boer line seemed to shrivel into fragments.

The Boers, in turn, now flung themselves down into

the grass, just below the crest on the southern side of the hill, and shot diligently in reply. The ridge itself was narrow, and clear of obstruction, and the two irregular firing lines were sometimes parted from each other by an interval of less than fifty yards. Rarely was the interval more than eighty yards, and it tended to grow even narrower as the more daring spirits crept forward to get better aim.

And so, through the long black hours, till the red dawn began to break far to the left, the fight betwixt the lines raged. Sometimes, with crouching figures, a Boer rush would be attempted ; sometimes a British officer stood coolly up to get a better view of the fight, or ran forward, followed by a cluster of his men, to reach some point of vantage. In every instance the attempt drew from the opposite line a new crackle of angry rifles. The British had been surprised, but they clung to the edge of the contested ridge with cool and unyielding pluck. And the Boers, though they had the elan of attack, and the advantage of surprise, could not break their way over that irregular ridge of earth, guarded by the English rifles as with a barbed wire of flame.

The English, it is to be noted, had—on Wagon Hill, at least—no trenches, and no sangars ; their only screen was the flashes of their rifles.

With the quickly growing daylight the fight became keener. The men could not see their foes, it is true, but they could see the rock, the patch of grass, the little ridge of brown earth, from which the hostile rifle flashed. A hundred cool and deadly rifle-duels were waged along that front of nearly a third of a mile. The Boer reserves did not fling themselves frankly into the fight, or they might well have broken

through the thin screen of flame that guarded the summit of Wagon Hill. But the Boer front was fed constantly from below. They had two rifles in the firing line for every one the English possessed; and the losses on both sides of the ridge were cruel. The Sappers and the Gordons were practically destroyed. Amongst the Imperial Light Horse, out of seventeen officers ten were killed, and only three left unwounded. But two more companies of the Light Horse came up, some men of the 60th Rifles, with a hundred and fifty Gordon Highlanders, and the British front was never shaken.

A hundred curious incidents marked that strange fight. The excitement and passion of the charge had by this time died out on the Boer side. The British, from the outset on the defensive, had never been kindled to any excitement. On both sides of the ridge the mood was one of steady and iron endurance; a determination on the Boer side to hang on and win at all costs; a resolve on the British side to die in the grass where they lay, but not to yield an inch! It was a fight of Homeric quality; made up of personal duels, the contest of man against man.

In front of Kit, a little to his right, a Boer marksman of very deadly quality had found a lair, covered by two low, broken rocks. His rifle flashed with murderous accuracy, and every British rifle within fifty yards cracked in answer. But still, through the tiny gap in the rocks came, unabated, the deadly flash of the Boer rifle. Kit saw a British officer to his right thrust the muzzle of his rifle—a sporting gun—over a stone, and lift his head cautiously to take aim. The Dutchman's rifle cracked, and the British officer rolled heavily on his side, while

his rifle fell from his hands. It was Lord Ava, the son of the Marquis of Dufferin, a most gallant and promising soldier. Another officer near, eager to revenge his friend's fall, lifted his head recklessly; but before he could fire the Dutchman's gun spoke again, and the unfortunate officer fell, shot through the spine.

His officer now crept up to Kit.

'You are a good shot, Somers, the best among us; can't you stop that beggar yonder amongst the rocks?'

'I will try, sir,' said Kit.

He had studied the ground in front with a keen eye. Some twenty yards in advance rose a tiny eminence. It seemed to offer no shelter, but Kit saw it was covered with long grass and slightly hollowed, like a spoon. If he could reach it, he could not only suppress that fatal rifle in the rocks, but enfilade the Boer line for some distance. But to reach that point, he must creep into the open, and draw upon himself a deadly rifle-fire. It seemed like going out to death. Yet Kit never faltered. He put down his face in the grass for a moment. 'Lord!' he whispered, 'be my shield. If I forget Thee, do not Thou forget me.' Then he crept out, like a lizard, through the grass on his perilous adventure.

'Come back, Somers,' called the officer; 'that's madness.' But Kit never paused. If he could reach the spot on which his eye was fixed, he could take that murderous Boer marksman in flank.

A quick-eyed Boer to the left presently caught the swaying grass through which Kit was wriggling, and whipped it with his bullet again and again. Other rifles from the Boer front joined in the performance; but Kit, lying as close to the soil as a rock rabbit,

crept resolutely onward, till he found himself lying in a tiny curve of the soil considerably in advance of the British line, and at a height which enabled him to cover the ridge for a hundred yards on either side.

He lay quietly for a few minutes, watching keenly through the long stalks of dry grass the patch of rocks that covered the Boer marksman. Presently an elbow became visible, and the bead of Kit's rifle instantly covered it. He knew, with a born marksman's certainty, that his foe was under his strokes. He still held his fire, however, and as the upper arm, the neck, and head of the Boer cautiously rose into vision, the tiny black bead of Kit's rifle sank lower. The Boer was drawing a deadly bead on some unseen object, when Kit's rifle flashed with a spark of white flame. The Boer's weapon exploded idly in the direction of the sky, and then fell from his hands. That fatal rifle was silenced! And from behind, Kit could hear a faint sound of clapping of hands. His comrades had watched his exploit, and were cheering it.

Kit now proceeded to study the ground in front and on either flank, and to clear it of hidden enemies. He wasted no shot, but waited till the flash of a rifle showed where a Boer was hidden, and one by one cleared out the hostile marksmen within his range.

Suddenly he heard a scuffling behind him. He looked back; a Gordon Highlander, bare-headed and red-faced, had crept up in his tracks.

'Well, young fellow,' he whispered, 'what's the prospect?'

Kit laughed, and pointed to a patch of long grass some hundred and fifty yards distant.

'There are half a dozen Boers there,' he said.

The Highlander's eyes gleamed.

'Well,' was his comment, 'I have hit the bull's-eye at seven hundred ; I think I can hit a rifle-muzzle at seventy.'

He and Kit in succession drove bullet after bullet with careful aim into that patch of grass. In another moment a dark figure was seen creeping out of it to the rear. The Highlander's rifle cracked ; the figure stretched itself out with a sudden jerk, and then lay still.

'Bull's-eye,' grunted the Highlander, with a chuckle.

In another moment four figures leaped up from the long grass and ran zig-zag and crouching down the slope for cover. Kit fired and missed.

'That's sheer waste,' grumbled the Highlander, who fired, and missed too. A second Boer was making straight for a cluster of rocks. He leaped over them in his run, and while his body was still in the air, the Highlander's rifle spoke again, and the figure, with relaxed limbs, drooped inertly on the rock.

'I call that pretty shooting,' said the Highlander, with much complacency, to Kit.

Meanwhile the slow hours crept past. The heat was great ; the air was acrid with the fumes of gun-powder. Morning grew to noon, noon drew on towards evening. Still the obstinate lines confronted each other ; still the rifles flashed in the grass, and the figures lying still, their last shot fired—broad-hatted Boers, khaki-clad British—multiplied fast. From his point of vantage Kit could see far along the line, and the drama of the battle had sudden episodes, that transacted themselves under his eyes, of a very startling sort.

Thus at one point the Boers suddenly made a daring rush across the open, bent on breaking through the slender British line. They ran stumblingly forward, big, slouching figures, their leader, a huge, black-bearded man, leading them gallantly. It was De Villiers himself, in command of the whole Boer assault. But right in their path, a dozen figures leaped up to meet them. Foremost of the group was the major of the Gordons, a shape so commanding that even De Villiers seemed dwarfed in comparison.

‘Hoo!’ yelled the Highlander at Kit’s side. ‘Yon’s the major. The Gordons! The Gordons!’ and he tried to leap to his feet, that he might race over and join his comrades.

Kit pulled him sternly down. ‘Steady,’ he said, ‘We must hold the line here. And look!’

The Homeric combat they were watching, as a matter of fact, had reached, and passed, its climax almost at a breath. The Scotsman ran forward a few steps, halted, lifted his revolver, aimed coolly at De Villiers, and fired. He missed! De Villiers, with equal coolness, had lifted his rifle; its flash answered, in an instant, the tiny spark of the revolver, and the stately figure of the great Scotsman, shot clean through the forehead, reeled forward and fell, stone dead.

The appearance of the two groups, the dramatic duel betwixt their leaders, had been so sudden and swift that, as yet, no other rifle had spoken. But now the guns flashed redly and fast on both sides. A Light Horseman, standing beside the fallen Scotsman’s body, shot De Villiers dead, and was, in another moment, himself shot. His slayer, in turn, fell like a stone, under the bullet of a young Sapper officer. A wail, a splutter of Gaelic curses, at Kit’s side, expressed

the Highlander's emotion as he saw his major fall. Then he fell silent. Kit heard his rifle grimly busy, while, from every bush and rock near, the English rifles were flashing. The Boers staggered under that relentless fire. Their leader had fallen; the impetus of their rush had expended itself. They crumpled up, they reeled back, leaving the crest strewn with many dead.

The artillery, at this stage of the long fight, drowned all other sounds. A battery of guns galloped up to the base of the hill on the English side, wheeled, unlimbered, and commenced to fling shells in a long low curve exactly over the crest on the unseen Boers, clinging obstinately to the reverse slope. The British battery itself lay under the stroke of the great Boer gun on Bulwana; it was scourged with a deadly rifle-fire; yet its practice was cool, quick, and perfect. It was fine and gallant shooting! The shells skimmed the very lines of the British, grazed the ridge, and fell, a hail of deadly, flying splinters, on the Boers.

About four o'clock came the strangest incident in this long fight. The clouds had been piling themselves up with tropical blackness in the southern sky. Now there broke over the long and blood-stained hill, with its crouching lines of desperately fighting men, a furious storm. Hail and rain beat with cruel fierceness on the slopes, strewn with the wounded and the dead. The deep thunder shook the very skies. The whole scene of conflict was blotted out. The guns ceased firing, since the hill was hidden from the gunners by the whirling mist. The British were crouching for shelter under the lee of every stone they could find. The upper chambers of the air seemed to be the scene of a mightier battle than that which had

raged for so many hours along the bloody ridge of the curving hill.

The storm was at the back of the Boers; the eddying mist had silenced the British guns, and seemed to offer a friendly screen for a new assault; and with fine courage and judgement the chance was seized.

Suddenly, borne on the howling wind, came a wild, tumultuous shout. Kit, peering through the driving rain across the ridge, saw, like darker shadows against the shadowy background of the grey, whirling fog, a great mass of charging men. The Boers were attacking again! On they came, with a determined rush. A shout ran along the British front; every man leaped to his place and opened fire. Some flung themselves down in the grass, and fired fast from that shelter. Others, of more vehement temper, ran forward in the open, and fired on their foes at less than pistol-shot distance.

A curious fortune had, in the rush, befallen Kit and his Highland comrade. They lay in the direct line of the rush, and the charging Boers swept completely over them, some of them actually treading on them, or stumbling over their bodies. Kit, looking up, could see, through the slanting lines of wind-driven rain, the bent faces—stern and bearded—of the Boers as they raced over him. Fortunately, they were staring eagerly towards the front, where they expected to crash in on the British line, and they paused to fire no shot at the recumbent figures under their feet.

The Highlander picked himself up, with many a Gaelic curse, and seizing his rifle, began to shoot wrathfully into the mass of the Boers.

‘The beggars,’ he gasped, ‘to run clean over me!’

Kit had his breath almost trampled out of him

and, when he recovered, found that his rifle was smashed. He could fire no more.

At this moment the fight reached its dramatic crisis. Over a point of the ridge, from the English side, came, edged with glittering points—the steel of levelled bayonets—a far-stretching line of charging men clad in khaki. It was the Devons, led by their colonel, Park. He coolly halted his men, for a moment, under the crest of the hill, to steady them. Then, at a word, the line came quickly up to the open crest smitten with a tempest of flying lead.

That vision of the charging line broke, with a curious effect, on the startled gaze of the Boers. The Devons had to bring up their left sharply to make their whole line bear on the crowd of their enemies, Kit watched the swinging line, on which the Boers were pouring a hurried and deadly fire. His heart seemed to leap into his throat as the bayonet charge lingered, and scores of wounded and dying men stumbled from the ranks of the gallant Devons. The steadfast line for a moment swayed and faltered, so cruel was the fire that smote it. 'Steady, the Devons!' cried their colonel, and the next instant the long line was running in fiercely with the bayonet. The Boers went reeling back, a broken mass; the British, all along the front, were joining in the charge.

Kit's Highlander, with a wild 'Hoo!' was running fiercely forward, and Kit, picking up an abandoned rifle, followed him. The Boers were being hurled down the wild, steep slope of the hill. The crest was lined with the triumphant British, some shouting madly in the intoxication of their victory; some hastily binding up their wounds; some, in the eagerness of their temper, following the broken Boers down the hillside, the

cooler spirits kneeling on the edge and firing, with murderous aim, at the flying mass. The rain had swollen the little spruit at its bottom to a rushing torrent. Against the grey water the figures of the Boers showed black, and many fell there, under the relentless fire from the summit of the hill. The whole reverse slope was strewn thick with the dead and the wounded. And just then, far off, from the east, came the faint sound of a British cheer. At Caesar's Camp the Manchesters and the Rifles had fought a fight as gallant as that of which Wagon Hill was the scene, and had won a victory as complete.

Kit had been over twenty hours without food ; he had endured the nerve strain of close battle for seventeen hours ; and it seemed, as the Boers vanished in the Kaffir-thorns of the valley beneath, on which the slanting rays of the setting sun were now falling, as if, suddenly, all strength had slipped out of his body. He flung himself down on the ground, utterly exhausted.

Just then his Highland comrade came, with dragging steps, up the slope. His face was black with smoke, his uniform was in rags ; he still clutched his rifle, the unsatisfied fury of battle was in his eyes.

'Well, matey,' he said, as he leaned heavily on his weapon, 'yon's a pretty fight. The beggars fought grandly ; there's no denying it. But oh, mon ! we've licked them grandly ! Hurrah for the Gordons ! It'll be grand news for old Scotland the night.'

'But,' replied Kit, 'don't you think those young fellows of the Light Horse did well, too ? And what about the sappers and the Devons ?'

'Oh, aye,' said the Highlander, in a tone of magnanimous concession, 'they didn't fecht so badly.

But oh, mon, it's the Gordons, it's the Gordons!' In his mental landscape nothing was visible but the kilts! 'If we only had a touch of the pipes!' he went on, while he commenced to strut to and fro, with twitching fingers, as though he heard their triumphant skirl. 'Or,' he added, stopping suddenly, 'a wee drappie o' whuskey!'

CHAPTER XXXVII

DEUS NON IRRIDETUR

To Cecil, at least, Mr. Arden's death was a secret gladness. It meant the disappearance of a peril. He no longer had to dread that his fellow in wrongdoing would babble indiscreetly. Dead lips tell no tales!

Mr. Arden's death, too, brought to Cecil a piece of unexpected good fortune. He was appointed acting manager, and had good reason to hope that he would get the permanent appointment. The horizon for him grew suddenly bright. Security and promotion—and both at once—were given him. Cecil was more than ever confirmed in the delightful belief that if what was conventionally regarded as a 'crime' were only committed with sufficient ingenuity, the 'criminal' need fear no retribution. It was mere clumsiness that brought punishment.

Then the thought of Kate arose again to his mind. Her loneliness, the shadow of grief that lay on her, clad her, to his imagination, with a new and yet more dainty charm. Mr. Arden's estate, too, 'cut up'—to use Cecil's own metaphor—better than might have been expected. His life was heavily insured, and he had some safe investments. The estate, Cecil shrewdly calculated, would give a clear £5,000.

Kit was out of the running. Kate's very solitude, Cecil reckoned, would give him a chance. He was prepared to throw poor Myrtle away like a plucked and withered flower. Her charms looked tawdry now, when set against the pure grace and sweetness of Kate.

What Kate passed through in those days none ever knew. Was ever a loving and pure-minded girl set in a perplexity so cruel! She owed a sacred debt to her father's memory. Yet she owed something to Cecil, too, and something to Kit; and these obligations seemed to be in deadly and hopeless quarrel with each other. She must keep her promise to her father—that obligation was peremptory. But if she told the tale of wrong-doing to the Board it meant ruin to Cecil. Her girl's hand would open the jail-door to him. Then, too, she must keep her promise, and tell Kit. But how could she do this without a cruel sacrifice of maidenly reserve? It would seem like calling back a once-rejected lover. How could she adjust the tangled equities of the situation?

In such a tangle the one clear, sure rule is to do what is immediately and visibly right. The way of duty runs through all perplexity, like a beam of light through darkness; but often only one step is visible at a time. Kate certainly could see only one step before her, but that she saw clearly; and where she saw clearly she trod surely. She must keep her word to her father. His saying that 'he could not sleep in his grave with a lie above it' haunted her waking thoughts and pursued her through her dreams. She would tell the Board, and would spend every penny she had in repairing the wrong to the bank. But she must tell Cecil what she was about to do. And

what a tale for a gentle-minded woman to tell the man who had tried to win her love, and whom she regarded with a kindness she herself only half understood!

Both Kate and Cecil were thus busy in thought about each other, but their thoughts bore a tragically unlike complexion.

Mr. Arden had been dead a month when Cecil received a note from Kate, asking him to call and see her that evening. Her note puzzled, and at first even alarmed him. It was not Kate's way to lightly send such a message. But Cecil took counsel of his hopes. What more natural than that the lonely girl should turn to her father's friend? Though, as the word 'friend' framed itself in Cecil's thought, an uneasy smile crept across his face.

When Kate entered the room where Cecil waited for her, he gave an involuntary start. It was a new and changed woman on whom he looked. She was dressed in simple black, and the colour brought out with almost dazzling effect her rich and pure complexion. But the change was in her expression. The girl was gone. A sorrow-wise and grave-browed woman stood before him. Always there was a peculiar clearness in her look. Air—the air of summer dawns—was not more transparent than her mind; and this was reflected—as the quality of the mind always is reflected—in her face.

But now she had looked on grief. She had passed through the fire of conflict. Her face was as sweet as ever, but there was a new strength and gravity in its lines. And, somehow, her trouble had ennobled her. Not when, clad in summer moonlight, she stood in the garden on the night when Cecil tried to win

her, did she seem so fair to him as now, in her rich, grave womanhood, black-clad, she stood before him. Here was a woman in whose keeping a man's heart and honour would be safe.

As he looked at her, Cecil felt with a sudden insight and certainty that puzzled even himself, that safety for him was bound up in Kate's love. As a swimmer drifting seaward on some cruel tide might look up to the clear flame that burned high in the darkened heavens in some tall lighthouse, so, for a moment, Cecil looked at Kate's pure face, with its new depth of expression, its suggestion of strength refined by pain. What an anchorage such a woman's love would be to a drifting soul! And Cecil realized unconsciously as he looked into Kate's eyes, with their steady depth and sweetness, that he had drifted; that he was in the rush of unknown currents, bearing him to unknown shores.

Always impulsive, he broke out at once :

'Oh, Kate! I grieve for you! Let me comfort you! Give me a right to comfort you. Let us forget the past. I want you more than ever. You are alone. Take me into your life!'

Kate's eyes took a startled look; a flush of colour swept across her face as she realized Cecil's meaning, and she lifted her hand with a sudden gesture of almost imperious restraint. Her eyes shone with a strange and steady light, before which Cecil's words died into silence.

'Don't, Cecil,' she said, 'don't! I sent for you to tell you something that is very bitter; that takes all my courage to say. Don't make the task harder.'

'What is it?' he asked, with an odd sense of disquiet.

‘It is something that burns my lips to speak of’—and she faltered.

Cecil’s face turned grey. What did she mean?

‘Cecil, my father, thank God! did not die with an unconfessed sin on his conscience. It broke my heart to hear it, yet it would have broken it worse if I had found it out after his death, and knew that he had died with sin hidden in his life.’

‘What do you mean?’ whispered Cecil huskily.

‘The money was not in the safe, Cecil, on that night of the burglary. It had been taken, and lost, before. The burglary was a trick, intended to conceal a wrong already committed. Yes, Cecil,’ she went on steadily and mournfully, ‘I know it all. I do not judge you,’ she added.

‘Judge me?’ stammered Cecil, in what was meant to be a tone of astonished indignation.

Kate said nothing, but the look of her eyes was more than Cecil could sustain. He shook as though smitten by ague. Then he abandoned all pretence of ignorance or denial and sank into a chair, burying his face in his hands. A moment before, Kate’s purity seemed divine to him—a harbour, a safeguard. Now it terrified him. It was judging him! It scorched him like flame. He had thought to win her love; now he trembled before the knowledge in her eyes.

Presently Cecil lifted up his face with a new alarm on it, as Kate went on to say:

‘Cecil, I must tell it all to the Board.’

‘Tell it all to the Board!’ he cried, with a note of terror in his voice; ‘that is madness. That will put open shame on your dead father; and,’ he went on bitterly, ‘though it may not count for much with you, it will send me to a jail-cell.’

Kate, like Cecil, was shaken with agitation, but she went on resolutely :

‘I promised him ! I promised him ! We must make reparation.’

‘Ah, Kate,’ said Cecil in despair, ‘your soft hand is going to open the prison door to me !’

‘Oh, it’s cruel ! it’s cruel !’ she cried, with broken and tearless sobs, ‘but I must keep my word.’

‘But what good,’ urged Cecil, ‘will telling the Board do ?’

‘I must pay back every penny of the money that’s gone,’ Kate answered.

Cecil stared at her with incredulous eyes. ‘Do you mean to say you are going to fling away your money, and go out penniless into the world, just to put back in the bank’s safe what somebody else has taken out of it ?’

‘Yes, I must. It was my father’s wrong, and his daughter must, for the sake of his honour, repair the wrong.’

‘Why, it will take every penny you’ve got,’ cried Cecil, with much agitation. ‘Kate, it’s madness ! It’s cruel. If you do that, it’s you, and not the bank, that we have robbed !’

‘What else, what less, can I do ? The bread I eat would choke me if it was paid for by money which ought to be spent in undoing my father’s wrong.’

‘But it was my wrong, more than your father’s,’ said Cecil, in desperation.

‘It was his, too,’ replied Kate steadily ; ‘and I would rather work my fingers to the bone than fail to carry out his wish.’

Cecil looked at her in mingled anger and wonder. What courage there was in this slender, girlish figure !

He felt her will was like steel. It was vain to contend with it. Its impact was like the energy of one of the elemental forces. Then there rushed over him the sense of what it all meant. His crime had come home. It had come by the strangest channel; that which was least expected, and which he felt at this moment to be the most terrible: by the lips of the woman he loved! Was it true that there was, over human affairs, no stern, inevitable justice? To doubt that, Cecil realized, was the delusion of a fool. *Deus non irridetur!* He thought his crime was buried in Mr. Arden's grave; and lo! it had come back to him in dreadful resurrection, and looked on him from the face of the woman he fain would have made his wife!

For a moment the ignobler side of Cecil emerged. He would deny everything. Kate had no proof. He would tell her that her tale was only her father's ravings, and would challenge it as a scandal. But, as he looked again at her face, his courage failed. He knew that denial was vain. He had covered the traces of his crime in the bank records with infinite art; but if the books were examined in the light of Kate's story, detection was certain, and a hundred collateral proofs would emerge.

He lifted his face at last. 'When do you mean to tell?' he asked dully. 'Give me time to clear out. I shall be an outcast; but I want to escape the jail if I can. It is not necessary to your father's memory,' he asked, bitterly, 'that I should wear handcuffs, is it?'

Kate was by this time exhausted. Her strength had slipped from her in the tumult of emotion through which she had passed. She could bear no more.

'I shall see Mr. Benson,' she said, 'in a week.'

Cecil felt her purpose was unshakable. He got up with sullen face.

'I will clear,' he said, 'by that time.' And staggering, almost like a drunken man, he crept out of the room.

A week afterwards, as Mr. Benson, the chairman of the Board, sat in his office, a card bearing the name of 'Miss Arden' was brought in to him. He glanced at it and frowned. 'Some application for a pension, or for help of some sort to poor old Arden's daughter, I suppose,' he said. Then he added, 'Show the lady in,' and, with a sigh, he prepared himself to spend half an hour in listening to the lachrymose appeals of some helpless woman.

Kate was shown in, and as she stood before Mr. Benson she pushed up the black veil from her face. That gentleman was waving his visitor to a chair, with a bored expression of countenance; but, as he caught a glimpse of Kate's features, he instinctively rose, with a gesture of respect. He had never before seen such a face, so clear and high-bred; nor eyes out of which looked a spirit so gentle and yet so strong. Here was no lachrymose mendicant, bent on winning, by the argument of her tears, a grant from the bank's coffers! Mr. Benson found himself, to his own amazement, bowing to his visitor as though she had been a duchess.

'Miss Arden,' he said, with great respect, 'I am glad to see you for your father's sake. What can I do for you?'

Kate's lips quivered at the note of kindness in Mr. Benson's voice, and that keen-eyed gentleman saw it. He began to fear the tears were coming, after all. A glance into Kate's eyes, however, reassured him. A

bright and steadfast courage shone in them. No ignoble errand had brought the owner of such a pair of eyes to visit him.

‘Mr. Benson,’ said Kate softly, yet looking him steadily in the face, ‘I have come on the most bitter errand that ever a daughter had. My father served the bank long.’

‘He did,’ interjected Mr. Benson, ‘and faithfully. We had no better officer.’

‘That makes it harder for me to say what I have come to say,’ replied poor Kate, with a fresh quiver on her lips ; for a moment, indeed, speech quite failed her, and Mr. Benson wriggled uneasily in his chair. He had the usual masculine dread of a woman’s tears.

‘You must judge,’ she went on, ‘whether what I say is to be treated as confidential. I must put myself and my tale wholly in your hands.’

Mr. Benson stared. To what was all this the prelude?

‘I will treat it,’ he replied, with a reassuring smile, ‘as being strictly confidential.’

‘My father,’ said Kate, with shaking voice, ‘served you long. Of late years his nerves gave way. He fell, unhappily, into the use of drugs. I don’t think that always he quite knew what he was doing. Before he died, thank God ! he quite recovered himself ; and, Mr. Benson, what broke his heart, and killed him, was the knowledge that he had acted unfaithfully to the bank.’

‘Yes?’ said Mr. Benson, with keen and questioning glance, as Kate paused, and hesitated. He was all the business man now.

‘He would have told you himself had he lived

and he charged me to tell you, when he knew he was dying, and to tell you myself, that there was no real robbery at the bank when those men broke in.'

'But the money went,' said Mr. Benson hastily.

'Yes; but it had disappeared before. My father had used the bank's money to speculate with, and had lost it.'

'What!' almost shouted Mr. Benson.

'The £5,000," said Kate, 'was lost in gambling on the Stock Exchange.'

Mr. Benson stared at her in wonder. The theft was not incredible; but that a daughter—and a daughter with such a face—should come to tell such a tale of her dead father was an experience quite new. Kate read the astonishment in his eyes.

'He could not sleep in his grave, he said, when dying with the shadow of such a crime on his memory. And Mr. Benson, he laid on me, his daughter, the bitter task of telling you.'

'Good heavens!' muttered Mr. Benson. He had listened to many strange tales in his time, but never to one quite like this.

'Was he in his right mind when he told you this?'

'Yes.'

'What did he hope to gain by telling me?'

'An easy conscience. No,' she went on with energy; 'he would have it told because it was right, and he knew there was no forgiveness for unconfessed sin.'

'He did not do it alone,' commented Mr. Benson, with a frown. 'Who were his accomplices? Was young Sparks in it?'

'I can only tell you of my father's wrongdoing,

answered Kate steadily; 'my bitter duty ends there.'

Mr. Benson cross-examined her keenly. She told him frankly all she knew, but no art could bring out a word or a suggestion that incriminated another. Kate had it on her conscience to confess her father's share; she would tell the tale of no one else's wrongdoing.

'Well, Miss Arden,' said Mr. Benson, at last, 'it is a tale bitter for you to tell and bad for us to hear. It is a hateful thing to know that an old and trusted servant of the bank robbed it. This is the sort of thing,' he grumbled, 'which makes us feel that no one is to be trusted. But we cannot prosecute the dead. Hang it! Miss Arden,' he demanded bluntly, 'why did you bring this tale to me? Then there's young Sparks,' he continued meditatively. 'We were going to give him the post, but he must have been in the wretched business, too.'

'Mr. Benson,' said Kate quietly, 'my father's life was heavily insured, and, thank God, I am able to pay back to the bank the money that has been lost.'

Mr. Benson stared with new astonishment at her.

'That is pleasant news,' he said, rather grimly. 'I think your father's estate is a clear £5,000; just about what was lost.'

'Yes.'

'And, excuse me, Miss Arden, for asking, but what do you mean to do for yourself? Have you friends who will stand by you?'

'No,' said Kate, with a sudden drop in her voice that made Mr. Benson's nerves thrill; 'no, but I have hands and my head. And I have God! I will work for my bread, and be happier working for it than if I lived in luxury, and left my poor father's crime unredressed.'

'Well, Miss Arden, I have not yet met many young ladies who are willing to give up every coin they have in the world for the sake of a father's honour—living or dead. You are a brave woman. Yes, by Jove,' he said, striking the table with his hand, 'and an honourable woman, too! and women are not always honourable. The bank, I am afraid, will take your money. A bank,' he went on ruefully, 'has no bowels. It will distil dividends out of a widow's tears, or grind them out of an orphan's bones. We city men are a hard lot, Miss Arden, but if John Benson has any influence on the Board it won't take every coin you have got. We will make some reasonable composition with you.'

'No, Mr. Benson,' answered Kate, with energy, 'the money is sacred to my father's memory. I will give every penny of it, and you shall judge yourself whether you ought to make the story public.'

'Why, that would be to put a shadow, not only on his grave, but on your life. If he were alive, it would be an awkward thing to compound a felony. But he is dead, and we are not going to let you buy off his memory and then blacken it after we have got your money. City men, hard as they are, are not such a set of cads as that comes to. We can hold our tongues in such a case. Of course,' he went on, 'there's his assistant, young Sparks. Did he know you were coming to me?'

'Yes,' said Kate reluctantly.

'Well, in that case, if he is guilty, he will clear out, and we will let him go. We have no evidence against him, and we won't hunt for any. We don't want to wash too much dirty linen in public. But, Miss Arden, we must help you in some way.'

'No,' said Kate, trying to fight back her tears; 'I

have the way of duty clear before me to walk in. And if it is sometimes hard, yet there is peace in it. But Mr. Benson,' she went on, and that keen-eyed gentleman noted that as she spoke a soft colour crept into her cheeks, 'there is Mr. Somers. He played a brave part when the robbers were in the house, and the police suspected him of being their accomplice, and his character is blackened.'

'Yes, it is a pity; but the young fellow, as I understand, was foolishly obstinate in the matter.'

Kate felt that Mr. Benson's tone lacked sympathy, and she went on with a deeper colour in her cheek:

'But he was right; and, Mr. Benson, before he left he knew he was right. He held the proof in his hands, and out of pure kindness he would not use it.'

'What proof,' asked Mr. Benson keenly, 'did he get?'

Kate hesitated. At last she told how her father had blundered into giving him the wrong paper—a paper showing the actual contents of the safe at the time of the robbery.

'And did the young fool part with that?' asked Mr. Benson sharply.

'Yes,' said Kate reluctantly; 'he gave it to me to give to my father.'

'The fool! I did not know your father was particularly friendly with him, nor he with your father?'

'No,' she answered shyly.

'Then where did the "kindness" come in? Whom did he want to help, when he was idiot enough to give back that paper?'

Kate's cheeks were aflame by this, but she answered bravely: 'He wanted to help me.'

'Oh,' said Mr. Benson significantly; and Kate went on: 'I was unjust to him, and he has gone to Africa

under a cloud ; and, Mr. Benson, it is not just ! I cannot help him,' she said, and the tears were by this time running unchecked down her face, 'but the bank can undo the wrong. And if you are a just man, you will be glad to clear the innocent.'

Mr. Benson smiled humorously. 'I can see, if I don't, Miss Arden, I shall be a mere villain in your eyes ; and to escape that calamity I will see what can be done.'

He went on to question Kate as to her training, her attainments, and what occupation she wished to get.

That night as Mr. Benson sat by the fireside with his wife he told her the tale of his visitor.

'Ah, John,' said his wife, 'a pretty face and a soft voice are always too much for you.'

'Yes,' replied Mr. Benson, with a laugh ; 'that's why you are Mrs. Benson, isn't it ? But this girl is a heroine, and we must do something for her. She won't let the bank help her, but you want a governess just now for the children. What could you wish for better than a brave, pure, high-minded, and well-educated girl like this ? And if she is living in the house of the chairman of the bank that will be the best protection for her father's memory she could wish.'

'Well, I will see her, John,' said Mrs. Benson, 'at all events.'

'Yes, and if you don't see at a glance that she is a jewel you must have lost the insight you had when you had the good taste to discover my virtues, and take me for a husband,' and with a merry laugh the subject was closed.

'I will send for her to come and see me,' said Mrs. Benson presently.

‘No,’ replied her husband, ‘I am going down to Middleford on bank business in a few days. Come down with me and call on her yourself.’

‘Well, I’m sure! One would imagine that it’s not a governess but a friend I’m going to get in Miss Arden.’

‘And you’ll get both,’ cried Mr. Benson heartily, ‘or I have got no eyes in my head.’

Kate was surprised in a day or two to receive a note saying that, if it was not inconvenient to Miss Arden, Mrs. Benson would call upon her at a certain hour.

When Mrs. Benson saw Kate’s high-bred yet gentle face, and read, with even keener eyes than her husband, the courage and grief of the girl she looked on, she made a more instant surrender than even Mr. Benson himself.

‘My poor child,’ she said softly, as she put her arms round Kate’s shoulders, and drew the girl’s face to hers.

Kate hesitated for a moment, and then put her head on Mrs. Benson’s bosom and broke into a passion of tears. She was motherless and fatherless, and that touch of generous pity melted her down utterly. Long the two women sat together and talked.

When Mrs. Benson rejoined her husband that night, it was to tell him that everything was settled.

‘Well, John,’ she said, in tones of decision; ‘your goose this time is a real swan. You have done better than you knew. I think Kate Arden will be a treasure. She is to come to us next week. I didn’t say a word about salary; I could no more talk of that to her than to my own child. But you must pay her something handsome.’

'But won't it be prudent to take her for a month or two first on trial?' asked her husband, with a twinkle in his eye.

'Trial?' snapped Mrs. Benson energetically, 'there's no trial needed. She's a treasure.'

'But we can pay too much for such luxuries,' protested Mr. Benson gravely. 'We'll give her a small salary to begin with, and raise it after three months if she gives satisfaction.'

'A small salary to begin with?' cried Mrs. Benson indignantly. 'I wonder you didn't propose to take your wife on trial for a month before committing yourself for life!'

'Ah! the marriage laws are, unfortunately, in a very imperfect condition as yet,' said Mr. Benson, with a pensive sigh. Mrs. Benson looked sharply at her husband; she caught the twinkle in his eyes.

'John,' she said, 'you are just making fun of me. But give a good salary to Miss Arden, and I'll forgive you.'

There remained for Kate one more task. She left it to the last, and she lingered over it with a curious reluctance, half bitter and half sweet.

She must write to Kit. He must know that he had been proved to be right, that his name was cleared—or would be cleared. She must confess to him that she had been unjust. She must do this to carry out her father's wish; she must do it to satisfy her own conscience. Yet her womanly sensitiveness made the task hard. She had sent Kit away, and sent him away in anger. This would look like a gesture of recall. Kate indeed more than half felt it was a gesture of recall, if not of surrender on her part. Yet it was inevitable.

The colour was burning in her cheeks as she wrote the letter. She almost felt as if Kit's eyes were looking at her through the characters she traced. Yet her letter was characteristically straightforward.

'DEAR MR. SOMERS,—I was unjust to you when we parted, and I owe it to you to repair, as far as I can, that injustice. My dear father, before he died, told me the whole tale. The men carried off nothing that dreadful night ; the money had been lost before, and my father had betrayed his trust. When he told me the story it was a confession. He knew he could find no peace with God until he had made such a confession. Thank God! he repented before he died. I know why you sent back that paper, and understand how noble and generous you were. Forgive my rash judgement and unkind words.

'We shall perhaps never meet again, but I write this because it was my father's wish. And my own conscience can find no rest till I have written it. I think you will understand why I cannot write many words, and will understand, too, all I feel. May God bless you! I am lonely, but not unhappy, for God helps me.

'KATE.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII

HOW THE SIEGE ENDED

WITH that long seventeen hours' struggle on Wagon Hill Kit's experiences of battle in South Africa practically came to an end. There remained, it is true, some seven weeks of close siege before Dundonald's horsemen, on February 28, rode into Ladysmith; and the slow, eventless days tested the fortitude of the British troops more cruelly than did even the perilous edge of battle itself. The daily rations shrank in scale. The men were wasted with hunger, scorched with fever, worn out with the strain of constant duty. The Boer guns, in slow and sullen fashion, still flung their shells on the streets and roofs of the town; but it was the strain of waiting, of standing perpetually on guard, the gnawing tedium of the slow days and nights, which tried the men much more than pain of wounds or the peril of death.

When the siege began, Sir George White said to his staff, 'We have two things to do: to kill time and to kill Boers—both equally difficult.' But during the long weeks which followed, the one daring effort the Boers made to carry the place by storm, the British found the process of 'killing time' almost too much for their ingenuity. The hospitals were full. Nearly every tenth man had been slain in battle, or died of disease. The survivors lacked all the outward signs of soldiership.

They were hunger-wasted, ragged, in many cases bootless. A forenoon's smart drill would probably have killed one-half the fighting force in the town. Only one thing survived: the ancient inextinguishable fighting courage of men and officers alike which belonged to them by virtue of their blood.

The weariness within the besieged town was accentuated, and made well-nigh intolerable, by the sounds of incessant battle which came to them from without. To the south Buller was toiling, in dogged, tremendous, if clumsy, fashion, to break through the passes of the Drakensberg to their rescue. Night by night there was scribbled, in pulses of flame, along the southern sky, some message from him, usually of a cheerful sort: 'All going on well,' 'Progress satisfactory,' &c. While, by day, over the rugged hills to the south came the muttered thunder of great guns.

Buller, trying to break through the iron barrier of the Drakensberg Range, had a task which almost rivalled that of Massena, as he stood in front of Wellington's great lines at Torres Vedras in 1810. Only, where the Frenchman failed the Englishman succeeded, though he lost five thousand men by death or wounds in the process.

It is easy to understand how that thunder of far-off battles—which never came nearer—being fought through slow weeks for their relief must have fretted the impatience of the besieged garrison. January 23 saw the tragedy of Spion Kop, the hilly Inkermann of South Africa. On February 5 Vaalkrantz was won by Lyttelton's gallant Durhams, and Hart's fiery Irishmen—and abandoned when won! Then Buller, having tried in vain to pierce the Boer centre, and to turn their right, flung himself on their left wing. The combats on

Hussar Hill, Hlangwane, and Green Hill were a bloody prelude to the stern fight on Pieters Hill ; and beyond this Railway Hill still barred the way into Ladysmith, though the Lancashires and the men of the Irish brigade died in scores on its rugged slope.

Then came, on February 26, the one movement for the relief of Ladysmith in which Buller showed himself a general with a touch of real skill. With Hart's Brigade he held the Boers fast on Railway Hill ; while, in a wide curve, he swung his whole army round, using Hart's Brigade as a pivot, till what had been the extreme right of his forces became the extreme left, and the Boer flank was hopelessly turned. On the night of the 27th the great barrier of the Drakensberg was pierced, and in all their trenches and laagers round Ladysmith the Boers were preparing for flight.

All these stormy days of fighting had reported themselves in waves of menacing sound to the besieged garrison. The vibration of Buller's guns, one keen observer notes, was like the sound of 'a far-off titanic drum-tap'—with the sky, it may be added, for a sounding-board. But as the fighting drew nearer, and became fiercer, these earth-shaking taps became a constant drum-roll, that sank and swelled mysteriously, but never quite ceased. During the fighting on Hlangwane and Railway Hill, the sound of battle rolled amongst the hills, now dying away, now shaking the very skies, for ninety-six continuous hours !

On the morning of February 28 Kit was posted on the shoulder of Wagon Hill. By some rare atmospheric condition all the hills had a curious sharpness of outline. A strange clearness lay on them. Every wrinkle in their huge sides was clearly discernible. Kit happened to look eastward, where a hill stood with almost startling

relief against the clear sky ; and he saw what seemed to be a moving thread drawn across its round and lofty back ; a thread that now seemed to gather into tiny knots, and then spread itself out again. What could it be? Kit carried a pair of excellent glasses, and, taking them out, he quickly found that what he saw was a long, unending procession of Boer wagons, crossing the hill. Their swaying tilts showed every now and again clear against the skyline. It was an army in flight. The great trek had begun.

For hours that tiny, far-off stream of wagons trickled down the slope of the great hill. It grew denser. Now there came irregular groups—they could not be called columns—of horsemen and guns.

All Ladysmith was staring at that sight by this time. Sick men crept from the hospitals to look on it. The men in the trenches shouted themselves hoarse with delight. They were looking on an historic scene, that will be memorable for centuries. The tide of war had turned. The Boers were abandoning the long-held siege.

Presently a curious figure, like a black inverted V, appeared above the redoubt on Bulwana Hill, from which Long Tom had, for so many weeks, bullied the town, and smitten it with its fire. It was a derrick ; the Boers were about to carry off their famous and cherished gun. Instantly, from every British battery within range, the guns opened fire upon it, and the black V-shaped derrick vanished in mere splinters !

Just at this stage a furious storm of mingled hail and rain swept over the town, with its girdling hills ; but not hail nor rain could abate the exultant shouts that went up from every street in Ladysmith, and every

hillside trench and battery and sangar held by the British. Kit found himself—he scarcely knew how—amidst a group of the Gordons, shouting in wild excitement. Amongst these he recognized his friend the sergeant who had shot side by side with him in the grass on the summit of Wagon Hill.

‘Eh, mon,’ said the Scotchman, ‘this is grand. This is nearly as good as yon fight on the hilltop,’ and he pointed, with a gesture, to the high ridge of Wagon Hill.

‘Why, it’s better than that, surely,’ said Kit.

‘Weel,’ replied the Scotsman, ‘I’ll no’ say that. Yon was a bonny bit of shootin’.’

‘But this means,’ said Kit, ‘that the siege is ended. The Boers are clearing out.’

‘What else could they do?’ asked the sergeant gruffly, ‘when the Gordons are here; and there’s more of them coming,’ he added, with an air of pride. ‘Our second battalion’s with Buller.’

Kit smiled at the delightful certainty with which the sergeant evidently believed that it was the Gordons who had saved Ladysmith.

But the excitement of the day was not yet over. Evening was drawing on when a thin column—a mere brown thread—of trotting horsemen was seen coming down the ridge which served as a low wall to the river flat on the south. They were not broad-hatted, loose-riding Boers, but visibly two or three squadrons of British riders.

The actual relief of Ladysmith was, in a sense, an accident. Buller, always heavy-footed and doubtful in pursuit of a broken enemy, had halted his main body, and sent three hundred Carabineers and Imperial Light Horse to ascertain by what route the enemy had

retreated. This scanty little force pushed onward until, from the summit of a ridge, they looked down on the tin roofs of Ladysmith some three miles off. Mackenzie commanded the Light Horse ; Gough, the Carabineers ; and for a moment, while the column halted, the two leaders held brief debate. The little town was in sight on whose fate all England had hung for many weeks past. Should they push through to the town ? The goal was too tempting and too near to be refused by such a pair of gallant cavalry leaders.

‘Are we going through to-night, Mackenzie ?’ asked Gough.

It was not in a soldier’s nature to refuse ! A few brief words, a gesture, the bridle-reins were shaken, and, with a shout, the horsemen went galloping down the hill at racing pace, and across the flat, seamed with Boer trenches, and rough with boulders. The intoxication of that wild gallop can be imagined. It was the one memorable hour of the men’s lives. They were making history.

The evening was darkening when the officers succeeded at last in steadying their column, on the edge of the town ; and, with some approach to order, the horsemen rode into the streets of Ladysmith. These were full of shouting men. Sir George White and his staff met them at the centre of the town ; and, while the leaders clasped hands, the crowd went, temporarily, mad with excitement.

Buller himself was still far off, amongst the hills ; and the *Times* correspondent in Ladysmith has recorded how, the same night, he started out in search of that general ; so that, as he put it, ‘the first act of delivered Ladysmith was to try and discover its deliverer !’ Buller, as a matter of fact, did not enter

Ladysmith until March 3, when his columns—the Dublin Fusiliers leading—marched in.

The sight was thrilling. Buller's men came with swinging step and heads erect. They had been tempered in the fire of battle for long weeks. They were brown with the sun, hardy with exposure and toil; and they looked a body of men with whom—as Wellington said of the Peninsular veterans—a competent general might have 'gone anywhere and done anything.'

The contrast in appearance betwixt the relieved garrison and their stalwart relievers was startling. 'They were not men,' wrote an officer in the relieving force. 'They were what had been men. Eyes sunk back in their heads; cheeks hollow, and their necks all fallen away.' Hunger and fever and the whole long strain of the siege, in a word, had reduced White's gallant troops to mere skeletons. Yet which played the braver part—the men who forced their way, with a valour so high, through the Drakensberg Ranges, or those who held, for so many months, and with a courage so enduring, a mere open town against such odds—who shall decide?

Kit had shouted himself hoarse, like everybody else, in the excitement of the relief; and he carried the good news, with the first scrap of nourishing food he had been able to secure, to Boyd, who was supposed to be convalescent, but who, for mere lack of proper diet, was still in peril of death. The fever had burned itself out of his blood; but, in the poisoned air of the hospital, and under its make-shift diet, his life was still drooping.

'Boyd,' cried Kit, 'the siege is over! The Boers are on the trek, and Buller's horsemen are in! We'll

soon have you out of this now, and get you to some place where you can breathe clean air and drink sweet milk; and we'll make a man of you again.'

Poor Boyd was little better than a skeleton. His beard was streaked with grey; his eyes were filmy, and sunken deep in his head. But, stirred by the contagion of Kit's cheerful news, and yet more cheerful face, he seemed to rally.

'Yes,' pursued Kit, 'we shall have letters from home, and news; and you will be a hero when this is all over.'

'There is not much heroic about me,' said Boyd, with a quite new humility. 'I have done nothing except been a trouble to the doctors and a nuisance to everybody else. You are the hero, Kit.'

'Nonsense,' said Kit energetically, 'you have had a share in a great history; and you will tell the story to your children a quarter of a century to come.'

Boyd shook his head ruefully. 'I shall be a better man, I hope,' he said humbly, 'for all I have suffered. I look at things now with different eyes.'

'Yes,' replied Kit, 'and that's the gain God meant you to reap in this rough field of war.'

The day after Buller entered the town the long-accumulated mails came in. Many letters, alas! were meant for eyes that were now turned to dust. Two or three letters were for Kit; and one, as he took it, sent a strange shock through him. It was in Kate's writing, and brought the story of her father's death, and her acknowledgement of the injustice which had been shown to Kit. A mist crept into Kit's eyes as he read. He could almost hear the music of Kate's voice running through the syllables as he tried to read them. He shut his eyes to keep back the tears, and

her face rose to his imagination with a vividness that well-nigh took away his breath. Her voice was calling to him across so many leagues of sea. The letter, he felt, was, consciously or unconsciously, a gesture of recall. He would answer it in person. The long siege had shaken his health; he had earned his discharge, and would have no difficulty in securing it.

The thought of looking in Kate's eyes again, of touching her hand, of, perhaps, winning her love, intoxicated him. As soon as the necessary formalities were gone through, Kit was on his way to Cape Town, to take the first steamer to England.

CHAPTER XXXIX

HOW KIT CAME BACK

A YOUNG man, with the brown of African suns on his face and a look of curious eagerness and anxiety in his eyes, rang the bell of Mr. Benson's house in Russell Square, one June afternoon, and asked to see Miss Arden. The maid brought his card into the schoolroom where Kate sat, with the innocent-sounding demand, which nevertheless sent the blood from Kate's cheeks: 'Would Miss Arden see Mr. Somers?'

No answer had come to Kate's letter from South Africa. Kit, as we have seen, had determined to bring his answer in person. But Kate, of course, could not know this; she was in ignorance, indeed, as to whether her letter had ever reached its destination; for Kit, she knew, had been shut up in Ladysmith. But now he was in England; in another moment they would meet! Kate had to put her hand on her breast to steady the throbbing of her heart. She heard his coming footsteps, and was secretly amazed to recognize how familiar the sound was, and what a music lurked in it. She had heard that footstep in her dreams often of late.

The door opened and Kit stood before her. Their hands clasped, and each gazed eagerly on the other's face. Kit saw before him the Kate of his dreams;

graver, perhaps, than the girl he had left, but nobler, sweeter, stronger, as well as graver; his eyes dwelt with a tingling delight on every line of her face. He recognized the dainty set of her head, the wide brows, the steadfast, starlike eyes, the rich coronet of silken hair. The touch of her hand thrilled him—the slender fingers, with such quickness and strength in their slenderness. He wanted no more at that precise moment than the touch of Kate's fingers, the depth and sweetness of Kate's eyes, the frank purity of Kate's brow. Speech, he oddly felt, was unnecessary—almost impertinent. He was conscious of no passion of desire to kiss her. Merely to look at her, to breathe the perfume of her presence, to feel the clasp of her hand, had all the sweetness of the most passionate caress.

Kate, on her part, looked at her lover with a girl's swift and all-including glance. This was not the Kit she had known. Something was in his face now as a constant element which before had only been visible on it at rare intervals: a look of power, of resolution, of clear intelligence. The face had all its ancient frankness and goodness. The steady eyes were there, the level brows, the clear-cut lips. But that white scar, scribbled on his brow by a Boer bullet, was the signature of battle. The fair, crisp, close-cut beard and moustache were signs of manhood. The whole face was of one who had looked on death without fear; had borne hardship; had been tested by peril.

The countenance, in a word, had been shaped, like the character behind it, in the red furnace of battle. There was a curious air of mastery upon it. Yet underlying all these signs of somewhat stern manhood there shone the loyal, unselfish Kit of her girlhood.

And Kate knew in one breathless instant that her heart had found its master at last.

Neither spoke at first; neither felt the need of speech. Each was reading the hieroglyphics which time and change and sorrow had written on the other's face. Each, it may be added, was too completely mastered by the simple over-running joy of meeting for speech. Kate recovered herself first, and she drew back her hand, while a swift and vivid blush swept over her face. Kit contemplated the withdrawn hand with an astonished and visible regret, that made Kate's blush deeper, while it sent a shy smile to her lips. He plainly seemed to think that soft little hand ought to have remained permanently in the clasp of his big fingers.

'Kit,' she said, 'you are good to come and see me. I had no right to expect it.'

"No right?" demanded Kit, with a note of indignant interrogation in every letter of the words. "'Good?'" he added reflectively; 'yes, good to myself. "No right?" Why, Kate, what did I come to England for?'

'On business, I suppose,' said Kate, with a gleam of humour in her eyes.

'Yes; on business—on the happiest business that ever brought a man across the sea. You are my "business," Kate! I got your letter.'

Kate winced at the words. They reminded her of her father's shame, and, it may be added, her maidenly self-respect was still a little sore from the process of writing that letter to Kit.

'I had to write it,' she whispered sadly.

'Yes, Kate; and it was the kindest and most generous letter a woman's hand ever wrote. That is,' he went

on hurriedly, with a sudden sense that he was touching a wound in Kate's life, 'of course it was bitter for you to have to write about your father. But, oh, Kate, I am afraid I am selfish. I always was selfish where you are concerned'—a statement which sent Kate's eyebrows up in half-indignant challenge.

'That you thought of me and wrote to me was like yourself. It was generous; it was beautiful.'

'What else could I do, Kit?'

'Thank God, you didn't do anything else. But, Kate, I will try not to be selfish. I can guess what your father's death must have been to you. Yet,' he went on in graver tones, 'death is a little thing. I have learnt that, at least, in South Africa. Sin is the one terrible thing; the one thing that parts souls for ever, and your father repented. God's mercy was in that repentance; He never rejects a grief He has Himself inspired. You must think of your father as forgiven. God has cast His sin into the deep sea of His own forgetfulness, and we may well do that, too. He is beyond the reach of ill or shame now.'

The tears by this time were running unashamedly down Kate's face. This was just the sympathy she wanted. Here was one who could think of her father's sin and of her father's repentance exactly as she did, and the look of gratitude she gave Kit was so deep and radiant that for a moment it took his breath away.

Then with fine, but quite unconscious art, he persuaded Kate to talk of her troubles. She found it—to a degree which amazed herself—a relief, if not a gladness, to talk. The quick, sure, all-comprehending sympathy with which Kit hung upon her words, and even anticipated their sense, acted on her like sunshine on some half-frozen flower.

Presently Kate began in turn to question Kit about what he had seen and done and suffered in South Africa. It gave him the keenest delight to see the eager intelligence in Kate's eyes, and to hear the unconsciously tender concern in her voice ; but the moment the conversation swung round upon himself all topics vanished from Kit's mind, save one.

'Kate,' he said humbly, 'you are the last woman in the world to trifle with a poor fellow, and it is a question of life and death to me. When I got that letter it was like the touch of your hand across the sea. It was your voice whispering to me through all those leagues of space. I thought the letter gave me leave to come back to you, and I have come. Kate, it is a big thing to ask, but give me yourself—yourself.'

'It is a poor thing to give,' she replied, with quivering lip.

'It is more than all the gold in England and South Africa to me.'

Kit had got possession of her hand by this time, and her shy reluctance seemed to vanish at his touch, and at the fire and passion in his eyes. She lifted her eyes to his, and for a moment went deathly white. There was a look in them Kit had never seen yet, and that almost frightened him. It was the gift of a woman's life.

Then she yielded to the clasp of her lover's arms. She shut her eyes like a tired child. Her life at last had found its home. She was only half-conscious of the kisses Kit was raining on her hair and eyes and lips.

Mrs. Benson had of course heard of Kate's visitor, and when they met after Kit's departure she searched Kate's face with keen and humorous eyes. What had happened was writ large on Kate's expressive features.

There was a glow on her cheek, a soft, tender fire in her eyes, a smile like a quivering sunbeam played about her lips, all of which were very expressive symbols to Mrs. Benson's shrewd gaze. Beneath that keen look Kate's cheeks flushed a yet deeper crimson. Then she ran across the room, flung her arms round Mrs. Benson's neck, and hid her glowing cheeks on her bosom.

'Kate,' said that lady, 'so that young man from South Africa has turned up, has he; and you have surrendered at sight?'

Kate, for reply, only kissed her with silent but expressive energy.

'But a woman in love,' Mrs. Benson continued, 'has neither eyes nor common sense. She is not to be trusted for a moment. In nine cases out of ten she is in love with a mere phantom.'

'A phantom!' cried Kate.

'Yes; a phantom of her own creation. I am going to judge for myself. I am not going to let you throw yourself away.'

'Throw myself away,' replied Kate indignantly, in a crescendo of anger, 'why, he's everything . . .'—here voice and words failed her.

'Oh, yes,' interrupted Mrs. Benson, with a sniff, 'he is all the cardinal virtues buttoned up in one coat, but that's just your soft foolishness. He'll not trick me, though he has you'; and she took Kate by the shoulders and playfully—yet with a touch of vexation beneath her humour—shook her.

Mrs. Benson was, in fact, a little bit jealous and more than a little bit anxious. She did not believe in a young man from South Africa driving up to her door and carrying off, as with a gesture, her protégé

and treasure ; still less a young man whose character needed, like a broken plate, to be 'mended.' Mr. Somers might be an ill-used young man ; he was certainly a very unfortunate one. Love of justice in the abstract is not a woman's strong point. Mrs. Benson had an unreasoning and very feminine prejudice against a lover who had been compelled—with no matter what degree of injustice—to make his appearance before a bench of magistrates on what was practically a charge of burglary. She stipulated that when the impatient lover called next day she would see him, and she went to the interview in a somewhat hostile mood.

'Well, Mr. Somers,' she began, 'Kate wants to persuade me that you and she are engaged.'

Kit flushed and smiled, but lifted his eyebrows a little bit in wonder. 'Certainly I am quite persuaded of that happy circumstance, Mrs. Benson, and I hardly know whether I am walking on air or on prosaic earth as the result.'

'Miss Arden,' said Mrs. Benson, with some grimness, 'is under my care ; she has no mother, and I feel a mother's responsibilities about her.'

'Kate is very happy,' replied Kit, 'to have a care so gracious extended to her,' and he looked at Mrs. Benson with an honest gratitude which fairly disarmed that good lady. She, in fact, fell more quickly and hopelessly under the spell of Kit's face and character than did even Kate herself. Kit was visibly sweet-natured. A transparent honesty and frankness shone in his eyes. And yet there was a strength, a soldierly gravity and alertness about him, too, that took Mrs. Benson's fancy captive ; while her sense of humour was tickled, and her jealousy for her sex was disarmed by the mingled humility and fire of Kit's love.

'Of course I am not worthy of her,' he went on, as if in soliloquy, 'but, then, no one is'; and this was said with such a note of conviction that, while Mrs. Benson smiled, it yet brought the moisture to her eyes. This was a lover to satisfy even the dreams of a maiden's shy and virginal fancy.

'John,' said Mrs. Benson to her husband with unusual decision as they sat by the fireside that night, 'you must do something for young Somers, and you must do it quickly. Kate has had sorrows enough, poor thing! and now I am determined she shall have a good time.'

'You mean that she shall get married with the least possible delay,' said Mr. Benson, with a dry smile; 'that is a very feminine conception of a good time.'

'Yes,' replied Mrs. Benson unashamedly, 'it is; and it will be a golden time for the young man, too. It is pretty to see how plainly Kate's lips are to him what the Beautiful Gate of the Temple was to a good Jew. He waits on them with a sentiment of half-religious worship. But I am not going to let Kate marry a young man whose character is in a damaged condition. What is the bank going to do for him?'

'The bank, my dear, does not feel called upon to patch up a fractured character, even for the sake of advancing by a week or two the date of a wedding.'

'No; your bank is a horrid thing. It has no conscience and no sentiment. But the young man got into trouble by trying to save the bank from being robbed, and the bank must give him a good position by way of making matters right.'

'That is a woman's view of equity,' commented Mr. Benson. 'Here's a young gentleman who knows nothing whatever about banking; yet because he has

got into trouble, for which the bank is in no way to blame, it must appoint him to a post for which he is totally unfit. Mr. Somers may be a good engineer, but he would certainly be a bad banker.'

'That's nonsense, John. Mr. Somers is fit for anything; he could be trusted with uncounted gold.'

'How do you know that, my dear? Is it you or Kate who is in love with this prodigy?'

'Both of us, my dear,' replied Mrs. Benson unblushingly; 'and you will have no rest till something is done for him.'

'This is mere bullying,' said Mr. Benson, with a smile. 'In the interest of my domestic peace I must get this dangerous young man off to South Africa as soon as possible.'

At the end of a week Mr. Benson sent for Kit. 'Mr. Somers,' he said, 'you played a fine part in that burglary business, and got very unjustly into trouble over it, and the bank owes you something; but even a bank has sometimes a debt it can't pay. We could hardly make you a grant in money'—here Kit shook his head very decidedly—'and we can't take you on our staff. You have not the training. To make you a second-rate banker would be a mere waste of good materials for a young gentleman of your inches and with your gift for adventure. But I am the chairman of a syndicate which has large money investments in South Africa, and is likely, when this war is over, to make them still larger. I believe we could trust you as our representative. Your professional knowledge is of great value, and from the inquiries I have made about you I think we should be doing well for ourselves if we gave you the post. I am prepared to offer you a salary of £750 a year, with travelling

allowances and a percentage on profits. And when the world knows that the chairman of the bank has put his private interests in your charge, no one will venture to hint anything against your character. It will be the most effective way of saying that in that unpleasant business you played an honourable part.'

'Thank you, Mr. Benson,' said Kit simply. 'I will serve you loyally. I want to bring a clean name to Miss Arden when she becomes my wife, and your offer gives me that.'

CHAPTER XL

IN THE WRECK OF A CREED

THE manifold disasters—moral, financial, and controversial—which had overtaken the F.A. naturally set all tongues in Middleford wagging. Perhaps John Blunt suffered more from this circumstance than any other representative of his side. People were afraid of Mr. Gifford, and no one ventured to approach him; while nobody took such gentlemen as Mr. Bagges, Mr. Leech, or Mr. Stumps seriously enough to discuss the affair with them, though no doubt a good deal of what may be called the rough satire of the streets, and of public-house bars, was expended upon them.

But most people liked John Blunt, and everybody trusted him, and hastened to discuss the ill fortunes of his creed with him. Mr. Blunt had a wholesome capacity for silence, and this made the business of attacking him reasonably safe. He suffered most perhaps from an interview with Mr. Looker.

The two met in one of the side paths of the Middleford public gardens one pleasant afternoon, and Mr. Looker's wrinkled Socratic visage wore a humorous look as he greeted his friend.

'Well,' he began, 'Mr. Hobbs's legacy has done its work with singular completeness and success. I heartily congratulate you, Mr. Blunt.'

John Blunt stared at his companion uncomprehendingly.

'Why,' he said, 'we think it a failure.'

'A failure! Oh! you are far too modest; though modesty, perhaps,' Mr. Looker went on meditatively, 'is the one virtue which Freethought is likely to produce in excess. Events will make it necessary.'

John Blunt still stared with puzzled and questioning eyes, but made no reply in words.

'The legacy,' continued Mr. Looker, 'was for the purpose of making practical applications of Freethought principles to human affairs, was it not?' John nodded a silent assent. 'Well, that is exactly what we have all been witnessing. Your principles were applied,'—and Mr. Looker carefully checked off each detail on his fingers—'first to Claude Meares, with the result that he became a suicide. They took possession next of young Sparks, and made him a rogue. Mr. Arden swallowed them, diluted with other opiates, and he is in his grave, assisted thither, it may reasonably be suspected, by the dose. Mr. Creakles, too, was an example of all your queer theology produces, and he has gone off with your funds. Now, that'—Mr. Looker went on, with the air of a judge summing up a case—'is a pretty good record.'

'Then, if these are your successes, look at your failures. The spectacle is quite as instructive. You know, Mr. Blunt—for you tried—that your theory of the universe could not run a Sunday school, or support a mission, or reform a drunkard. You proved that as clearly as any proposition in Euclid. And it could not help a dying child, or bless its grave when it was dead. Mr. Gifford found that out. That is a pretty wide field of practical demonstration. As a contribution

to practical ethics the famous legacy,' said Mr. Looker judicially, 'is the most successful experiment I ever heard of. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Blunt?' he inquired with an air of pleasant curiosity.

'Well, we have our failures,' admitted Mr. Blunt; 'but so has Christianity.'

'Yes; but a Christian rogue is one in spite of his principles. He represents the failure of his creed. Your Mr. Creakles and the rest represent the triumph of your theology. They are your successes.'

'And is it your theory,' asked Mr. Blunt grimly, 'that Freethought directly tends to produce rogues? That is scarcely polite, is it?'

'Well, it destroys the logic which enforces duty, and that pretty well comes to the same thing. But,' Mr. Looker went on, 'your Mr. Gifford keenly interests me; he will develop, I suspect, in some very surprising directions. He will blossom out next, I am pretty sure, into a sacerdotalist of the High Anglican, or Romish, variety. He is married, unfortunately,' he went on meditatively, 'or he would naturally become a priest, or join one of the Romish orders. I would dearly like to see him with a shaven crown and a Franciscan robe and cowl.'

John Blunt contemplated his tormentor with puzzled eyes.

'Mr. Gifford a priest?' he inquired, with astonishment.

'Certainly! That's the evident probability. He is a sort of human pendulum, you know, and he will obey the law of the pendulum. He will swing now to the remotest pole from Freethought. Moreover, his self-confidence is shaken. He feels like a man who, when he thought he was walking on solid ground,

suddenly discovers that he has stepped over a precipice. He will clutch at any rope! "Freedom" has betrayed him. Now he will try to creep under the shelter of some external authority, and the more hoary it is with age, and dark with quarrel against light, and empty of all "freedom" in thought, or anything else, the more eagerly he will accept it. Romanism for him, in his present mood, will be a better opiate than anything poor Arden knew. Only to obey; to let somebody else think for him; to get quit of the anguish of choice, the weary and perilous responsibility of sitting in judgement on great alternatives—this will seem to him the one condition of peace. He will be tempted to depose reason, since reason has proved so false a guide. Yes; a Trappist monk, or perhaps a theosophist, is Mr. Gifford's next stage. These things follow the wreck of a creed such as his.'

John Blunt's capacity for patient silence was by this time well-nigh exhausted; but just then Mr. Walton turned the corner of the path and looked at the pair. His shrewd eyes saw at a glance what was taking place, and he eyed Mr. Looker sternly.

'Looker,' he said, 'let the man alone. You have a sort of impish faculty for extracting intellectual enjoyment out of a tragedy. This isn't a mere affair of controversial victory for one side or another. Here are human souls who have been honestly trying a perilous experiment, and their ship has gone to pieces under their feet. Don't jeer at them. Try to help them.'

'Is it a particularly honest experiment which Mr. Bagges—or, say, Mr. Creakles, has been trying?' asked Mr. Looker, with an innocent air.

'You can count these men out,' said Mr. Walton.

'They are found in all camps. But Mr. Gifford, or Blunt here, is as honest as the day. Let us respect them, and not jeer at them'; and, with a look of battle in his eyes, Mr. Walton hurried on his way.

John Blunt was on his road to Mr. Gifford when he was captured by Mr. Looker; and, disquieted by that gentleman's ingenious forecast of what was likely to happen next, he hurried on his way with a quickened step.

Mr. Gifford had denied himself to all visitors, but he welcomed John Blunt. His honesty was a medicine for him; his gift of sympathetic silence was a balm. Talking to John was merely a form of thinking aloud. And it was the limitation of Mr. Gifford's oratorical temperament that he could only clarify his thoughts by uttering them rhetorically. His countenance lightened for a moment when his visitor entered; but John was startled by the look on his leader's countenance. His face was ashy. There were lines of grey in his dark hair. His eyes seemed deeper set than ever. He was pacing restlessly to and fro, talking to himself as he paced.

'Well, John,' he asked, with a pathetic smile, 'did you ever see a wrecked ship on the rocks? I am that wreck; or, rather, I am poor Cowper's Castaway'; and resuming his restless pacing to and fro, he began to quote with deep voice:

No voice divine the storm allayed,
 No light propitious shone;
 When, snatched from all effectual aid,
 We perished, each alone.
 But I beneath a rougher sea
 And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

Inarticulate sympathy was written on John's broad

face, but he was wisely silent, and Mr. Gifford's soliloquy ran on unchecked :

'Yes, I thought—I was sure—I had found rest. My intellect was content. Sometimes,' he mused, 'I had strange and wordless disquiets beneath it all—disquiets that came I knew not whence, and meant I knew not what. But they had no root in reason, and I put them aside. I was honest; I think I was honest.'

Here John nodded repeatedly in silent but energetic agreement.

'Christianity, as I saw it, was an exploded superstition. My new creed seemed to fit all the facts. The very scale of the universe justified it. It had great names and great arguments on its side. It was the cause of science, of a free and brave intellect. And then suddenly a touch—a breath—destroyed it! My little child's dying cry refuted it. The grief on my wife's face, the aching of my own heart, brought it to mere bankruptcy.

'I doubted it,' he went on, 'when I found that it put fire into a drunkard's thirst. I doubted it sometimes when I looked at the faces round our committee table. But I put the doubt aside. Has not every great cause its parasites; every army its camp-followers? My own lectures convinced me. I argued with myself more than with my audience, and I argued myself into new certainty. Smears' death troubled me; the change I saw creeping over that bright lad Cecil's character troubled me almost more. But it was when I found that my creed went out, like a flame exhausted of oxygen, in the chill and blackness of death that I knew I was mistaken. And the flame that burns in Christianity does not go out!' he cried with raised

voice. 'Somehow it does not. What is its secret? I must learn it. There is something in it which has evaded me.' Then he walked to and fro for a space with restless feet and hanging head.

'Yes,' he went on again, 'life and death are against my creed, and their logic is final. I give up the dreadful controversy. And, John,' he whispered, stopping abruptly, 'reason has failed me, or betrayed me. It has no office. I want a guide, a master. Christ is no more real to me than He ever was; and He is too far off if He exists at all. I want an authority at hand—visible, audible, that my senses can touch; one that does not argue, but only commands.

'Do you know, John,' he said meditatively, 'I think the Romanists have more to say for themselves than we ever imagined. I will have a talk with Father Kelly. He is a Jesuit, and I know the history of that order. It isn't a pleasant tale. But, after all, it is best to have some one else to settle matters for you, and the Jesuits do that, at least. To escape this burden of thinking, this anguish of uncertainty, this strain of self-choice . .

John here was all amazement, as he reflected on the malign insight of Mr. Looker.

'I have talked with Mr. Walton,' continued Mr. Gifford. 'I envy the glow and contentment of his faith, but I can't share it. I don't know how to reach it. An army of shadows bars that path against me. I want some one to decide for me.' A long pause followed. 'I will see Father Kelly,' he suddenly repeated. 'Will you come with me, John?'

John shook his head vigorously. 'No,' he said, 'I would rather do without a creed than go and sit at

the feet of a priest. We know what Romanism is. You know, Mr. Gifford, even better than I, its history.'

'Yes, John; but think! It has the centuries with it. It won and held such intellects as Newman and Manning. Yes,' he repeated, 'I will see Father Kelly.' And the last vision John had of Mr. Gifford was as he hurried off to the Roman Catholic presbytery.

CHAPTER XLI

THE SECRET OF CERTAINTY

JOHN BLUNT found himself left stranded and desolate. His humility of mind needed a teacher; and teacher now he had none. Mr. Gifford was visibly a lost mind. John would have gone out with him, bare-footed, if necessary, on a pilgrimage in search of a new faith, and would have waited patiently for some happy discovery by his guide. But when John saw Mr. Gifford disappear within the doors of the Jesuit presbytery, he came to a sudden halt. There was enough of a formless and inarticulate Protestantism in him, bred of a vague knowledge of history and the far-off teachings of his boyhood, to make any excursions into Papal territory impossible. As for the Association, John now clearly realized, what he had all along more than half guessed, that he was in hopeless quarrel with its ethical ideals. It belonged to a moral—or rather immoral—realm in which his honest lungs could not breathe. He was, as far as creed went, bankrupt; and, with the instinct natural to his patient and humble temper, he looked round for a new guide.

Could any of the representatives of orthodoxy in Middleford help him? John passed them all in review. Mr. Looker contemplated everything through satiric spectacles. Professor Gardner was as dry as

the Scotch oatmeal upon which he was brought up. Mr. Sawders brought to his religion the spirit of a debt-collecting attorney, eager only to win his case and overthrow his opponent. Mr. Walton, with all his goodness, translated his whole creed into terms of emotion; and John had the typical Englishman's incurable suspicion of emotion. Finally, John thought of Mr. Campbell. He called up the vision of his shrewd, homely face, with its nimbus of mingled humour and saintliness—that rarest of combinations!—and his sore heart was curiously moved. Here was a man who might have a message for him.

While he meditated, walking slowly to and fro in the shadow of the great elms in Middleford Park the sound of approaching footsteps broke upon his ears. He lifted his head, and Mr. Campbell himself, at that exact moment, came into sight. His head was bent pensively, as he came slowly down the avenue, buried in thought. As the two figures approached each other, Mr. Campbell looked up, and his face lightened when he recognized John Blunt. He stretched out his hand frankly.

‘Mr. Blunt,’ he said, ‘I have thought a great deal of you of late. We are both idle men, just now; let us have a talk under the kindly shadows of these elm trees’; and the pair commenced to walk slowly to and fro, side by side.

John Blunt had no power of self-interpretation, and speech at first seemed frozen on his lips. But Mr. Campbell's quick brain, and even quicker sympathy, almost instantly read the poor fellow's trouble; and with infinite tact and gentleness he drew him out, till John Blunt found himself talking with an ease and a self-forgetting frankness that astonished himself,

'Yes,' said Mr. Campbell presently, returning to his starting-point, 'I have been thinking a great deal about you. John, you are not far from the kingdom.'

'And what "kingdom" is that?' asked John, with a prick of wonder.

'The spiritual kingdom, in which the most childlike is the most kingly.'

'I am not dreaming about any "kingdom,"' said John ruefully, 'but I do want some little patch of solid ground on which my feet may stand. I confess I feel just now like a man caught in a quicksand, and I don't know how deep the quicksand is.'

'Well, Christianity can give you solid ground enough.'

John shook his head doubtingly. 'I wish it were true. I gave up my secular creed because I found it did not work. That key, at least, does not fit the world's lock. Does Christianity, Mr. Campbell? Will it work?'

'A thousand times over, yes. For the individual man who accepts it, and masters its secret, it is final. It has a new verification in experience every day, and a hundred times a day. Till at last, for the man that lives by its great law, and in its atmosphere, it is not faith, but knowledge; not hope, but certainty! It is the last and the oldest of the apostles, you remember—it is St. John—who, after nearly sixty years' experience of Christianity, affirms over and over again, "WE KNOW!" "*We KNOW that we have passed from death unto life*"; "*we KNOW that He abideth in us*"; "*we KNOW that when He shall appear we shall be like Him*"; "*we KNOW that the Son of God is come and has given us understanding.*"

"I believe" is a great word, John ; but "I KNOW" is a greater !'

'Yes,' replied John meditatively ; 'I wish it were mine ! I wish Christianity were true ! But, looking at the world as a whole, can you really say that Christianity is a success ? It has been nearly twenty centuries at work, you know, and are you satisfied with the result ?'

'Well, God is in no hurry in working out His problem. He has all eternity, you see, for a black-board ! The mystery of His silent, waiting, and exhaustless patience is wonderful ; and the love in that patience is infinite. He has chosen to make us free agents, with power to delay His great purposes ; even to refuse them. And such a problem needs a great sweep of time for its evolution. What are twenty centuries to God ? What can we say but that the curve of His plans is wider than our little thoughts ; and His great patience leaves our fretting impatience rebuked ?

'Yet how much Christianity has achieved !' he went on, with energy. 'Its victories are greater than we realize. It works like some divine ferment in human life. It leavens our civilization. It slowly penetrates our laws. Suppose it were suddenly withdrawn !' he cried, with a new turn of thought. 'Imagine the whole world one vast Angel Court, a mere nest of crime and lust and cruelty ; and no better moral forces for its healing than are represented by Mr. Bagges and Mr. Creakles !'

That prospect, John confessed, was of sufficiently alarming quality. But he went on to remind Mr. Campbell that Christianity ought to reach its highest level in the Churches.

‘Can you say it does?’ he asked. ‘Does any real love exist betwixt the Churches? The Nonconformists sniff at the Salvation Army; the Anglicans despise the Nonconformists; the Roman Catholics shut the door of heaven against the Anglicans; and I suppose the Greek Church—though I don’t know much about it—anathematizes the Latin Church. Each Church in succession rejects all the others. Christian Churches are a mere catalogue of mutual rejections.’

‘Ah! you are quoting the *Freethinker*, John! It is clever, but not very accurate. Let the Churches be judged by their agreements, not their differences; and our agreements—though we ourselves commonly forget it—are infinitely greater than our differences. Yet I admit Christianity as a whole is waiting for its final and overwhelming credential.’

‘What is that?’

‘A true brotherhood amongst Christian men. Christ Himself taught us that, at the very beginning. ‘*That they all may be one*,’ ran His parting prayer . . . ‘THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE THAT THOU HAST SENT ME.’ And the world, as a whole, never will believe in Christ until His Churches, by their union, supply this last and greatest credential of Christianity. But the truth is, John, that the Churches at present are in the stage of disintegrated light.’

John looked puzzled.

‘Pure white light, you know, is really formed by the union of a cluster of coloured rays. Suppose the world were lit only by these disintegrated rays! It would be broken up into separate patches of all the primary colours—red, orange, yellow, and all the rest. And each patch of colour would, no doubt, think itself the final and perfect form of light; the only

one that had any right to exist. Every other tint would be a mere wicked heresy in tints! But what a patchwork the world would be! Not any one of the separate colour-rays, but all knitted together, makes the pure light—the true light. And no one of our Churches is the whole of Christianity. Each one holds part in trust. Each one is a separate ray. And some day God will whisper to us all, and then the separate rays of disintegrated light will melt into the white radiance of the perfect light. Disintegrated light,' murmured Mr. Campbell, as if to himself; 'yes, that is what we all are!

'I do not think,' he went on, after a pause, 'that Anglicanism is God's last word in the history of His Church; nor Congregationalism; nor Methodism; and least of all Romanism. What you see is a stage in a many-centuried evolution. To that final and perfect Church I love to dream the Anglican will bring his orderly ritual; the Congregational his freedom; the Methodist his fire; the Roman Catholic his unquestioning obedience; the Quaker his genius for silence; and perhaps the Salvationist his big drum!' and Mr. Campbell laughed gently at such a prospect.

'But,' he continued, more gravely, 'this is only my dream. Yet be sure that what you see is only a stage in an evolution which stretches through centuries. Don't judge the flower by the half-burst bud, or the perfect song by the mere prelude.'

Whether John Blunt quite understood all this may be doubted. Perhaps because he did not he broke out suddenly with a new and larger difficulty.

'The whole theory of Christianity,' he said, 'its version of man's place in the universe, of God's care

for each human soul, seems incredible. It is just at this point where Mr. Gifford's lectures were irresistible. How can we believe,' he continued hesitatingly, 'that God stooped to suffer for our sins? It seems to me His stars must hide us from Him. We are only a race of insects.'

'Well, the stars are only the furniture of God's house, and we are His children. We don't put the furniture before the children, or regulate our affections by the foot-rule; and why should God do it? Let a mother put her child in one scale and all the Himalayas in the other, and which scale will go up? After all, Jupiter, with all his moons, is simply a mass of matter, dumb, brute, and brainless. A single human soul—the soul of a little child—with conscience, and will, and power to love, is more than all the clay and granite which could be piled betwixt this and the Pleiades.'

So the talk went on in many an after-interview; and poor John often felt that he was wading in waters too deep for him; or trying to breathe an atmosphere too rare. It was not perhaps that Mr. Campbell's argument moved him; but his gentleness, his frankness, his quick sympathy, and the tonic of his own strong faith, subtly crept into the very tissues of John Blunt's mind and changed it.

'Mr. Campbell,' he said, one night, abruptly, 'you have done me good. You have turned me into new channels. Some new influences,' he said humbly, 'are, I scarcely understand how, stirring in me. But I am going to leave England. Mr. Somers wants an assistant, and he thinks I am fit for the post; so I am going to South Africa. Perhaps I may learn something more from Kit Somers, and from his wife

that is to be. They are only children in age compared with me ; but in knowledge I am only a child to them. And I will try to learn.'

'John,' said Mr. Campbell, 'I come back to my old point: you are not far from the kingdom!'

CHAPTER XLII

TWO LIVES

NOW came for Kit a chain of golden hours. He had won the woman he loved ; and some strong wine of happiness seemed poured into his very blood. And yet his happiness suffered exasperating interruptions. The marriage must necessarily come soon, since Kit had to go back to Africa ; and Mrs. Benson had charged herself with the solemn duty of making all the wedding preparations. Now a wedding for a woman—whether her own or any one else's—is the supreme event of life. It is a mystery ; a solemnity of almost more than religious seriousness. It must express itself in all the symbolism of millinery. The clumsy male imagination is, of course, unable to understand the mystic sacredness of silks and laces necessary for the due adornment of a bride ; so even the bridegroom himself has to be warned off that enchanted realm in which dressmakers practise their art.

In the Benson household the empire of the dress-maker was set up with all due solemnities. For Mrs. Benson, her husband, her very children, became for the moment of quite secondary interest. Poor Kit himself shrank into a mere irrelevance. Kate was seized as a sort of captive. She disappeared for long, mysterious intervals from human gaze. Solemn

councils were held over such high themes as 'shapes' and tints and materials. There were mysterious consultations from which all male critics were banished.

Poor Kit wandered about the house with rueful visage, mateless and unhappy. 'I am to be yours altogether soon,' Kate replied, with an arch smile, to his complaints. 'You can spare me, sir, for a few hours now.' Then, as he seemed still unconvinced, Kate cried, with lifted eyebrows and in shocked, unanswerable tones, 'You surely wouldn't have me be a dowdy on my wedding day!'

Kate, however, had some pity for her lover; his melancholy face pricked her conscience; and when he next came she met him arrayed in dainty outdoor costume, and with the announcement, 'I can spend a long afternoon with you.'

Kit looked at her—the perfect figure, the dainty poise of the head, the flushed cheeks, the eager eyes, the delicacy of the archly smiling lips. Kate had a look at once of girlish youth in its rich spring-time, and of womanly strength that thrilled him. England is the very home of fair women; but surely it held no other maid so fair! Kit reflected afresh, and with unexhausted amazement—as he did twenty times a day—that this figure so shapely, this face so fair and sweet, was his, all his, and for a life-time! A sudden moisture filled his eyes; and Kate, looking keenly, saw what it is given to few women to see—a man's whole soul flowing out in affection. She, in her turn, thrilled at the look in her lover's eyes, and with an involuntary gesture caught his hand with her slender, quivering fingers.

'Come, you foolish children,' cried Mrs. Benson, who at that moment entered, 'get off into the sunshine.

Let the birds sing to you. We don't want you here You are to see all the glories of the Kew Gardens, and you needn't come back till dinner-time, unless you get tired of each other's society.'

The outer world takes its complexion from the inner mind ; and for the happy pair that afternoon it became an enchanted kingdom. Was there ever sunshine so radiant as that in which they walked ? Did lovers' eyes ever before find so royal a purple in the cup of a violet, or tints so rich in the leaves of a rose ? Did ever such dainty perfumes float in the air as those which caressed their senses ? Or when did the birds sing such an epithalamium from the hedges as that which thrilled the ears of this pair of lovers that golden afternoon ! Was there ever, in brief, such another pair so intoxicated with innocent love and happiness ? A touch of the fingers was a caress. A meeting of their eyes was a poem, nay, an epic ! Silence itself, in the crucible of their love, was turned to golden meanings such as music seldom knows.

Kit, for his part, felt himself drifting on some golden river into fairyland. What plans and dreams they had for the future ! The miracle, in a word, which only love works, the blending of two spirits into perfect unison, was in their case already wrought. And Kit found in his companion a spirit coy yet quick and frank, virginal yet womanly, whose depth and strength filled him with ever-wondering delight.

The Bensons were accustomed to take, during the summer months, a pleasant seaside villa at Middleford, and this fell in very happily with the marriage arrangements. The kindly lips of Mr. Walton were to pronounce the magic words which were to link two lives together for ever. Kate went with the family

to Middleford for the few weeks preceding the marriage ; and to ramble amongst old scenes with Kate under such conditions was for Kit a sort of enchanted experience.

They stood together one night on the bridge where the three friends had held debate so many months before, when all the orthodox churches of the town were being shaken by Mr. Gifford's daring eloquence. Again, as on that far-off night, the moon was filling! the wide heavens with its milky radiance, whilst the flying clouds sprinkled the earth with moving shadows. The whispering stream ran beneath their feet.

Kit thought of the group that stood so long ago on the bridge. His comrades of that night were gone. Smears was lying in a suicide's grave ; Cecil was a fugitive. But he stood there holding Kate's hand and looking into Kate's eyes, while the moonlight touched her brow and cheek with unearthly grace. All the content that perfect human love could give was his ; and behind that human love—its source and explanation—was an Eternal love. Kit wondered afresh why this happiness should be his. It transfigured the whole world for him, so subtly does Nature answer to the mood of the soul. There was no lament now in the whispering river! It was no longer a parable of dark things. Did the drops, indeed, come out of mystery and vanish into mystery, driven of blind force?

Kit told the tale of that far-off talk on the bridge to Kate, and quoted afresh the sad stanzas from the 'City of Dreadful Night'—

The world rolls round for ever like a mill.
It grinds out death and life, and good and ill:
It has no purpose, heart, or mind, or will.

But that was assuredly not the message of the river to the pair that stood now on the bridge! Love had taught them the secret of the universe. It was no 'city of dreadful night' which lay about them. Kit had no strain of poetry in his nature; but the moment and the scene transfigured him. He whispered softly into Kate's ear—bending so closely to it that his brow thrilled as it touched the rich, soft silk of her hair—'*We are come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God!*' It seemed to him, indeed, as if the moon-lit streets of the commonplace town were the golden streets of the New Jerusalem! Is not love itself the very city of God?

'Look, Kate,' he said, gazing at the river, with eyes full of the wisdom that lies in gladness. 'There are no vagrant drops, forgotten and wasted, in that stream. Every drop of flowing water comes from one great service and hastens to another. It fell from the sky. It quickened the earth with its coming. It hastened to the sea. It will climb by some ladder of light and heat to the sky again. According to Mr. Gifford, all the worlds are whirling blindly in space, like so many dancing dervishes, and with no hint of reason or meaning in their gyrations. But the world, truly read, is a great, perpetually returning cycle of ordered and beneficent service. And if God remembers and shapes and uses each tiny drop in that stream, He will surely shape our lives for great services.'

Kate listened with charmed ears to such teaching from such lips. And she found time to wonder that she had never before discovered so much wisdom and poetry in the humble-minded Kit, whom she was accustomed to rule so imperiously in the days long past.

On another night he took Kate to the little pier in the lonely harbour where he had fought his fight of trouble and resolve after Kate had rejected him. Nature, in an accommodating mood, reproduced for the pair the scene with all its seeming melancholy. There was again the veiled evening sky, the grey, dusky floor of sea running beyond the reach of the eye, the sound of the lamenting waters on the beach, where the loitering white breakers spent themselves on the brown sands.

No one shared the silent pier with them; and Kit told the tale of how, after his interview with Kate, he had paced to and fro there, the starless sky and the sigh of the whispering foam on the beach reflecting the trouble of his own heart, as he realized that he had lost Kate, and tried to plan his life without her.

Kate pressed closer to his side as she listened.

'Kit,' she said softly, 'I didn't understand myself when I sent you away. I might have guessed from my tears after you were gone what you were to me even then.'

'What, Kate! Did you weep for me?' cried Kit, half in distress and half in wonder of gladness. 'I have vowed a hundred times I would never cost you a tear.'

'A girl doesn't always know her own foolish heart.'

Kit looked round. He could almost picture himself standing there on that sad night so many months ago, a lonely figure in the dusky twilight, half believing that the sun for him had finally set. How nature had tricked him with her symbolism of woe in the grey tints, the faint lights, the sighing notes, that seemed to reflect his wrecked love! What a golden compensation that he could stand there again, and by his side a companion so dainty and sweet, the very woman he thought he had lost for ever!





'I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND MYSELF WHEN I SENT YOU AWAY.'

'There is love behind all shadows,' he whispered to Kate, with conviction.

And so there came at last the wedding-day. Kit stood at the communion-rails, and saw Kate come up the aisle, her hand on Mr. Benson's arm. Mrs. Benson would have never forgiven him if she had known how absolutely unconscious Kit was of what his bride wore. He had no eyes for the flowing lines of soft white silk, the creamy fall of lace, the soft fire of pearls, or the keen lustre of diamonds. He saw only his bride's face. Nay, he saw only her eyes! That they shone like stars was little. They were full of a dewy tenderness that gave them a richer meaning than ever burned in any star the night skies know.

A bride usually goes with serene composure through the whole wedding ceremony, while the bridegroom flounders through his part with a clumsiness which is half humorous and half tragical. Kit certainly was like a man in a dream. He heard Mr. Walton's clear voice reciting the words, '*For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health . . . till death us do part*'; and the music of Kate's low voice in turn ran softly—as if in pursuit—through the syllables. But both voices seemed to Kit as though they fell out of some far-off chamber in the sky. Then the words were spoken which linked together to their last breath the two lives: '*Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.*'

'Kit,' said Kate reprovingly, when they drove away from the church, 'you were wicked. You were looking at me when we knelt at the communion-rails, and Mr. Walton was praying.'

'Yes; so I was. But, Kate,' he asked, 'how did you know?'

'I felt your eyes,' she said shyly. 'But why didn't you pray?'

'Well, Kate, I was looking at God's gift to me, and was thanking Him for it. Wasn't that prayer? Why, my thoughts keep chanting a perpetual psalm of thanksgiving for you.' Then he cried suddenly, clasping her hand, 'It's for life, Kate!'

'Nay, it's for ever,' she whispered, with wiser imagination and deeper love than even his.

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